UNKNOWN Worlds

25c APR • 1942
FANTASY FICTION

PRELUDE TO ARMAGEDDON . . . . . by Cleve Cartmill

The Fallen Angels knew that Armageddon and the promise of the final defeat was near. But there was a way by which they might hold off the end for all time. If they maneuvered the right man and right woman together—they would rule the world forever!

THE COMPLEAT WEREWOLF . . . . . by Anthony Boucher

Wolfe Wolf didn't know it was in his ancestry till the little magician showed him how to make the change. It started as a game, but being a werewolf led on to other things. Like being a trained dog in the movies—

POBBY . . . . . by Jane Rice

The author had a story he wanted to write—and Pobby complained as vigorously as his peculiar circumstances would permit. He was in the story, and he did *not* want the peculiarly sticky sort of end the author proposed—

THE ROOM . . . . . by L. Ron Hubbard

The doctor's room was his private den—a den filled with strange souvenirs with even stranger properties. The bottle of excellent liquor, for instance. A surprising sort of bottle to find in the little country doctor's room. It would pour, but it wouldn't empty—

How you can catch cold—and what to do about it

DUCK THAT KISS if the one you are kissing has a cold. Kissing is one of the surest ways of exposing yourself; bacteria may travel by direct contact.

LOOK OUT FOR SNEEZERS AND COUGHERS! Bacteria are shot into the air by coughs and sneezes and may enter your nose or mouth.

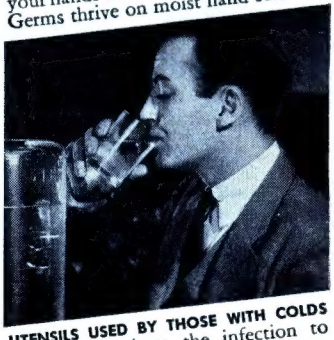
SUDDEN CHANGES OF TEMPERATURE make certain types of people more susceptible to colds. In some cases they weaken resistance so that bacteria, already present, may get the upperhand.

NOTE HOW LISTERINE GARGLE REDUCED GERMS

The two drawings illustrate height of range in germ reductions on mouth and throat surfaces in test cases before and after gargling Listerine Antiseptic. Fifteen minutes after gargling, germ reductions up to 96.7% were noted; and even one hour after, germs were still reduced as much as 80%.

IN SOME PERSONS DRAFTS cause disturbances of the circulatory system and, as in the case of sudden temperature changes, may lower body resistance.

BEFORE HANDLING BABY! If you have a cold yourself or have shaken hands with someone who has, always rinse your hands with full strength Listerine. Germs thrive on moist hand surfaces.



UTENSILS USED BY THOSE WITH COLDS may communicate the infection to others. Be particularly careful about children.

AT THE FIRST SIGN OF A COLD or SORE THROAT Gargle LISTERINE—QUICK!

This prompt and easy precaution, frequently repeated, may head off the trouble entirely or lessen the severity of the infection if it does develop. Carefully conducted clinical tests during the past 10 years showed these amazing results:

That regular, twice-a-day users of Listerine Antiseptic had fewer colds, milder colds, colds of shorter duration, than non-users, and fewer sore throats due to colds in many cases.

You naturally want to know why this is so.

We believe that it is because Listerine reaches way back on the throat to kill literally millions of the threatening bacteria known to doctors as the "secondary invaders" which may set up infection when body resistance is lowered for any reason (see panel above). In the opinion of many leading medical men these "secondary invaders" are the ones that so often complicate a cold . . . make it troublesome . . . result in the distressing symptoms you know all too well.

Actual tests showed bacterial reductions on the mouth and throat surfaces ranging to 96.7%, even 15 minutes after the Listerine Antiseptic gargle . . . up to 80% an hour after.

In view of this impressive evidence isn't it wise to keep Listerine Antiseptic handy in home and office . . . to pack it when you travel . . . to gargle with it often and thoroughly at the first hint of trouble?

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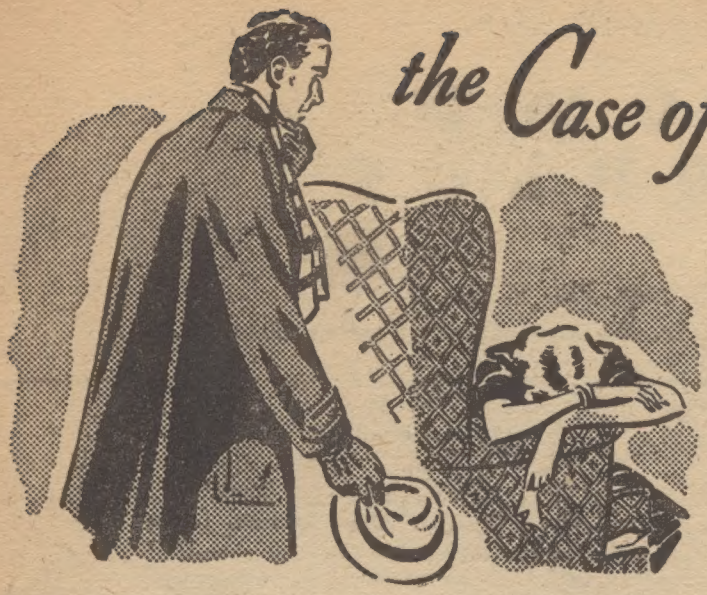
the Case of the Crying Wife



1 Ann doesn't cry easily—but that night I found her in tears! "I can't help it," she sobbed. "All the things we were going to do—buy a car, build a home—remember? And here we are—married three years, and just barely making ends meet! I thought our dreams might come true—but it's no use." I made up my mind right then to "have it out" with the boss.

2 "Look here!" he said. "I can't *pay* you more unless you're *worth* more! And frankly, John, you lack the *training* a bigger job needs. Ever hear of the International Correspondence Schools?"

3 When I learned the boss was a former I.C.S. student, I signed up *quick!* And what a difference it made in my work! I'd never realized until then how *little* I knew about the business.

4 I'm happy, and Ann's happy, and I guess the boss is happy. (At least I've had two "raises" in the last year!) And here's the very same coupon that I mailed, staring *you* in the face!

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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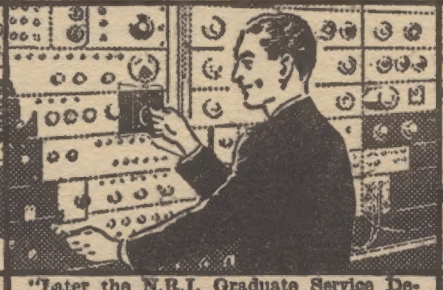

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THE SCIENCE OF MAGIC

There's a perfectly human tendency to believe that any man who does not reach the same conclusions we do is either stupid, bigoted, or a hypocrite. That's possible —but it's more apt to be that he has a background of information that leads him to reach that other conclusion.

The witch doctors, wizards, magicians and priests of earlier times were not stupid; some were most certainly bigoted and hypocrites, particularly those who, like the priests, had a "vested interest" in the set-up as it existed. A priest of Babylon who'd spent forty years of study, maneuvering and effort attaining the high priesthood would no doubt be willing to continue any lie that kept him where he was. But the genuine students of that day, and the millions of later days, were neither stupid nor attempting to maintain something they did not believe in—they sought truths just as ardently as a modern Einstein or Compton.

They had a fairly self-consistent body of logic, a definite methodology, and a theory of the universe on which they acted. Every science has to start from premises and assumptions, checking them against experiment. Our modern sciences start on physical assumptions; theirs started on psychic premises. Ours got ahead faster not because it was right and theirs was wrong, but because our physical science is more readily checked against facts with ruler, weighing scale and stop watch. Physical facts are demonstrable in a way that can convince the hardest-headed skeptic. That hydrogen and oxygen combine with the release of energy to produce water can be demonstrated with a force stunning enough to stop any doubters—or blow them out of existence if they remain unconvinced. But the psychic phenomena that do really exist—

They're too delicate, too fragile. A blind man can be cured by faith alone—if he's a victim of hysteric blindness. The paralytic can be made to walk—if he's paralyzed by a sort of auto-hypnosis.

The old students of magic had a view of the universe that was based on the mysterious and ununderstood. They tried to tackle the hardest problems first. They derived a theory of universal organization that was practically impossible to check against facts—particularly so in the days when communication was largely by rumor and camel back.

The basis of magic lay in polytheism—the first type of religion every savage tribe exhibits. Grass grows, lightning strikes. But if a man is stabbed by an enemy, it isn't the knife that actually is to blame—it's the man that made it move. Anything so awesome as lightning, felling trees, men, or houses, must be a sword, too—but one wielded by an invisible superman.

Beings capable of hurling lightning, controlling rivers and storms, with such powers, would be highly useful friends. But—trustworthy friends in that day were exceedingly rare, and always and only between equals. That a god would be a trustworthy *friend* was doubtful. The desirable state would be to have a god as a slave —a bondsman.

Magic was directed primarily toward attaining that end. Does it seem inconsistent to believe that humans could trap and enslave a god? To our understanding of God, it obviously is. To the then-general understanding of the word, it was not. Theirs were not omnipotent and omniscient. And there was always the possibility of enlisting the favor of a major god, to whom many subservient gods must listen and obey, to assign some underling to aid the human magician. There the enslaved god was the slave of a greater god, who was induced—by flattery, cajolery and sacrifice (bribery)—to instruct the slave-godling to perform the desired feat. (A king can be induced to assign his hunters to kill the wolf destroying the peasant's sheep.)

That type of magic was usually performed by priests, whose prayers to the main god were effective in inducing him to assign a godling to the task. Worshipers bribed the priests to ask favors of the god just as those same worshipers were accustomed to bribing courtiers to ask political favors of the king.

Bolder experimenters tried the other path. They wanted more certain results. Sometimes, it seemed, the priests were successful in getting Bel or Amon-Ra, or whatever they happened to call the local chief god, to assign some godling to the task. Sometimes they weren't successful. (Sometimes the man was blind because of cataract, which faith can't remove. Sometimes the paralytic had an injured spine, which the most ardent belief will not repair.) These bolder experimenters wanted to enslave the godlings directly, so that they might be forced to perform every time they were wanted, not just occasionally.

That was where the evocations and chants, the pentagrams and incense and symbols of strange form came in. Somehow the desired godling must be called. It meant devising some sort of trap that would hold him bound once he appeared, so that the magician could extract a promise of performance from him on threat of imprisonment. Every possible method of baiting the trap must be used, for the great difficulty seemed to lie in devising a way of getting the wary godling to appear that the trap might be sprung.

Evocation chants tended to grow longer with the centuries. Rumor that a Magi of Persia had evoked a godling by doing such and such would be added to rumor that an Egyptian priest got results with thus and so. Use both formulas at once, plus this one I thought of myself, and I may get something this time—

As to holding, trapping the god—remember their godlings were not supposed to be omnipotent. A properly inscribed pentagram traced with such and such a chalk would do the job.

Stupid and inconsistent? We have a godling ourselves whom we lead around by the nose, forcing him to work at tasks no man can accomplish, at superhuman jobs. We evoke him, enslave him, trap him, and dismiss him at will. We lead him around in copper wires, trap him in rubber and glass, evoke him by the proper mystic passes of a special sort of steel in a special sort of chamber very mystically designed. Or we can evoke him with the proper "incense" of zinc and sal ammoniac and carbon and manganese oxide, and have him trapped and waiting to run our flashlight when we will.

And we, like the Magi of old, are always a bit nervous about letting our godling escape from control to wreak his vengeance on us with fire, pain and mysterious, invisible death.

The Editor.

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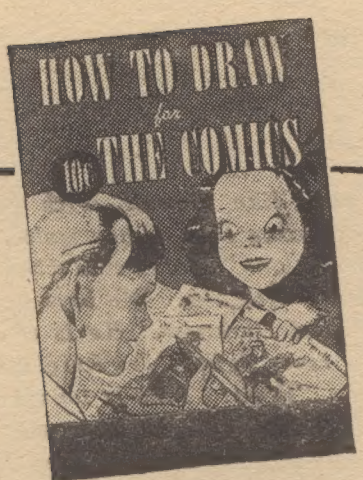

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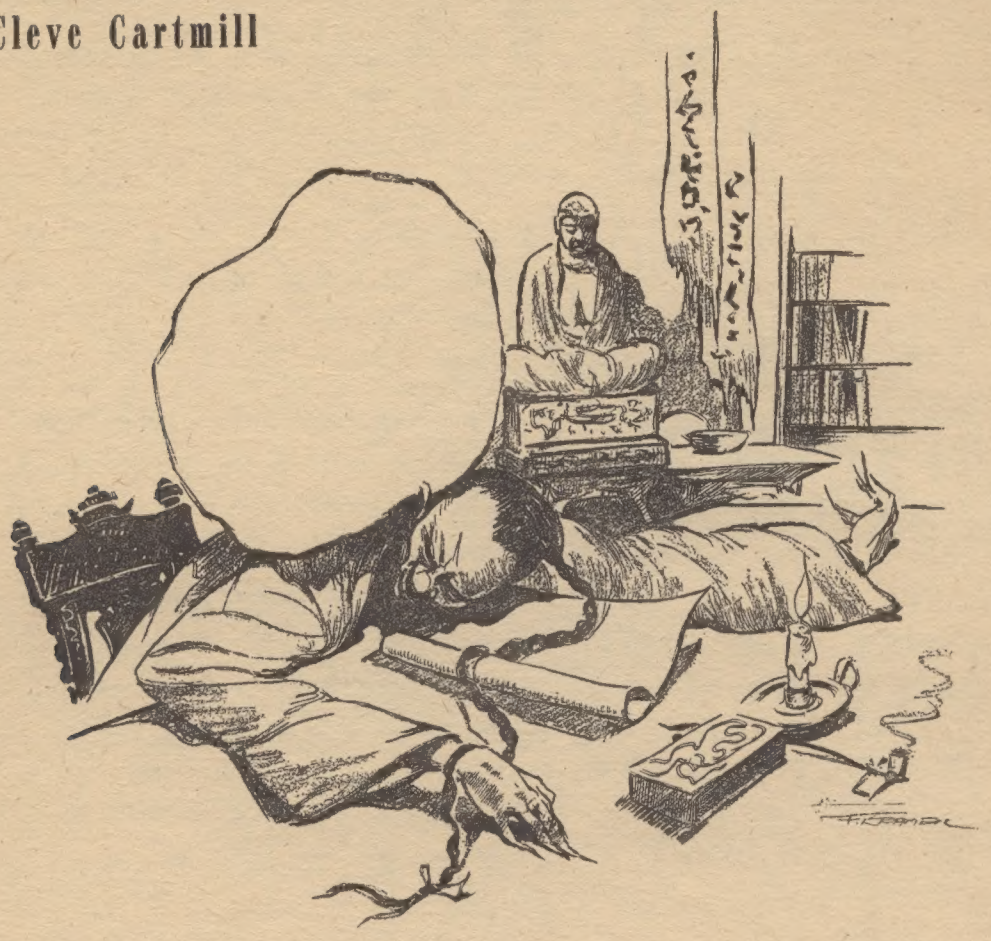
PRELUDE TO ARMAGEDDON

By Cleve Cartmill



● The Fallen Ones saw Armageddon coming—and saw one way to stave it off forever! There was a chance for them to bring about the birth of an immortal man and, through him, rule Earth forever. They laid their plans, they pulled their strings—and—

Illustrated by Kramer

PROLOGUE

Ira Rafel came away from the christening with no expression on his dark, pointed face. He thrust through the street shoppers, and they made way for him and he for them as if he were a man and not an angel.

He came, in an hour, to a bare expanse of earth and entered the mouth of a cave halfway up the side of a low hill. A moving radiance lighted his steps between its narrow sides, and he reached the solid rear wall without a misstep. He walked through this wall into a high-domed chamber in which was a stone table. Seated around the table were his fellow angels.

They were like himself, with black, flashing eyes and slanting lips. They waited.

"He is the one," Rafel told them. "We may communicate with him. We have broken through the Chains of Darkness. He is the throwback."

As their faces lighted, Ira Rafel flung up a thin, dark hand. "Wait! This is no cause for rejoicing—yet. We must find him a mate. Perhaps she will not live now. Perhaps never. But we must search, and if she is found bring her near to him.

"Then, brothers, our task begins. We are weary, yes. But we must go on, and on, and on. For Armageddon will destroy us.

"Go to the Old One. Tell him these things we have done. Tell him we have found the true hy-

brid who is fitted to produce an immortal. We shall try to find his mate.

"Tell the Old One this. Mayhap he will not be cast into the Bottomless Pit.

"Remember, my brothers! Ours is a great task, for we fight tyrannical omnipotence."

The white-haired man in blue jeans put down his shopping bag and stared through the orphanage fence for a few seconds. The little dark-haired boy looked up presently from the sand pile.

"I don't like you," he said to the man.

"You needn't," the man said testily. "What is your name?"

"Brad. My mamma and papa got hurt. I didn't, though. I was th'owed out of the car."

"Brad what?"

"McClain, silly. Why don't you leave me alone? I'm playing, can't you see?"

"All right, all right," the man said. "Do you like it here?"

"Oh, sure. It's keen."

"Do they teach you about God and the Devil?"

"I hate him, I hate him."

"You're a good boy."

The old man picked up his shopping bag and walked briskly away.

The angels were quiet, waiting for the voice from the Pillar of Light. Presently it rolled out with a great sound.

"They will be innocent, those who seek to translate the Lost Testament. A place will be prepared for them.

"But these are the words. Man must not know the Testament, for it is evil and there is overmuch of evil in the land. Even now, the adversaries seek to bring it to the eyes of men. Beware of falsity! Beware the adversaries, for they know nothing of justice.

"They know that Armageddon cometh, and in its day they shall be cast into the Bottomless Pit. Beware! Their desperation knows no bounds. As you have been commanded, so do."

The voice ceased, the pillar dimmed, disappeared. The angels talked among themselves.

"It is bad enough," one said testily, "to be in human form, but those baggy blue trousers—"

"Do you question the All High?" his companion asked sternly.

Hastily: "No! Oh, no!"

I.

"Blood shall cover the earth," said the angel. "This must be prevented. Armageddon must never come. You, McClain, and you alone may prevent it. You have the power. Find your mate! Take her, and bring forth a son! He shall live forever, rule forever, for you have eternity in your loins. You are the hybrid with whom we may communicate, and we tell you this—find your mate!"

Brad McClain snapped out of the lethargy these visions always produced, and tore the facial towel from his face. His wide dark eyes wheeled about the barber shop for a moment.

This was the third time within the week, the hundredth—thousandth?—time in his life the angel had appeared and told him he was destined to be the father of an immortal. He looked at Sam, the grizzled barber.

"Sam, do you think I'm crazy?"

"Sure," Sam said tolerantly. "Want anything on your hair?"

"I mean it," Brad insisted. "I either dropped off while I was under that towel or else I saw a vision."

Sam eased Brad back in the chair and dried his face. "Shucks, Brad, people always do that sort of thing. They just don't talk about it."

"I guess so. It worries me, though."

While the barber combed his dark hair, Brad stared at the kalsomined wall and thought about his visions. One person only was in them, one who called himself an angel.

He didn't look like an angel. He had dark straight hair and bright black eyes. He had a pointed face. He had thin slanting lips. He was like any number of people.

Clothes? Brad couldn't remember. Had he clothes? No matter. On the few occasions when the angel had appeared in what seemed to be waking dreams, the item of clothing had been unimportant. The messages had blanked other considerations.

Destiny, Brad thought. Father of an immortal, with the right mate? Why? My son ruling the world? Why? For whom? And what is a hybrid?

He paid for his shave and walked out into the bright street. Midafternoon traffic lazed between curbs, men and women drifted from store to store, and Brad felt again the slight contempt which had always held him apart from the crowd.

They never feel this restless Call, he thought. They walk the streets with eyes on the ground. Eyes dull or bright, sad or gay, quick or dead. Just eyes, unlifted.

They wear white shirts and oil their hair. No flowers over the ear; no stars from a midnight hill. They never hear this Call. No devil drives them. They are simply animated dead, unknowing, unburied. Why do I think like this? Am I really different? Do they, too, think such thoughts about me? Does each one stand apart?

No. Men neat from offices, fat with chauffeurs. Women gay with color, tired with packages, bright with frivolous hats, sleek in silken hose. Dead.

He shook these thoughts from his mind; and the noise, the rumble, the clatter, the pur of the afternoon and the thousand smells of a city street brought him back to reality.

"Paranoia," he said aloud. "I need a drink."

He ducked an apologetic head at a little woman who looked startled at his statement, and went to the State Bar, across from his office. As he turned in the door, he flung a look at his third-floor window and caught a glimpse of Sherry's blond head. She probably needs a drink, too, he thought.

He telephoned her from the corner booth. "Lock it up for refreshment. Beer will be waiting."

"What'll I do with Mr. Boles?" she asked. "He's been cooling his heels under your fan for three hours."

"Dump him in the elevator shaft. I think he lives there, anyway."

He sat at the bar and ordered two beers. The bartender put two bottles and two glasses before him, and as Brad trickled beer down the side of his glass, a hand touched him on the shoulder.

"Is that extra drink for your familiar spirit?"

Brad looked into the bar mirror and grinned at the dark face.

"I got a split personality, copper. Have one? Hey," he called to the bartender, "give the prophetic cop a drink."

Joe Balaam, the swarthy policeman, took an adjoining stool. "Only one. My personality is intact."

Brad watched collared bronze liquid rise in his glass. "You've got a smooth syntax for a cop. How come?"

"Is there a law?" Balaam countered. "Must I say dese, dem, and dose because I wear a star and gun?"

"People think so. It's part of the general resentment. Why do we hate cops?—I wonder. They're only hired men."

"Let's don't be philosophical, Brad. Let's drink. To the *Independent,* may its printing bills be paid on time."

"Amen," Brad murmured. "As long as I don't get in politicians' hair too often, I'll continue to publish the rag."

They clinked glasses, sipped. Brad turned his head as the radio at the end of the bar gave out results of the fourth race at Santa Anita.

"How about a hot flash on the sixth, copper?" he asked.

Joe Balaam frowned into his glass. "No, Brad."

"What's the matter?"

"It's betting on a sure thing. There's no sport in it."

"The hell not! Suppose your tip goes sour."

"It won't. Not ever."

"But I don't *know* that, copper. I put my two bucks on your choice and wonder if you've made another lucky guess."

"I'm not guessing, Brad."

"Well, maybe. Anyways, it's a gamble for me. Just this once, Joe, come on. Who wins the sixth?"

"This is the last, Brad. It's Milomin, by two lengths."

"Milomin? At what odds?"

"Five to one."

"Excuse me while I telephone."

He went into the booth, called a bookie he knew, and placed the bet. Sherry was at the bar when he returned, busy with the extra bottle and glass. She flicked a bright-blue glance at Brad and wrinkled her brief nose.

"Mr. Boles is unhappy," she said. "He thinks you don't love him any more."

"Any more? He makes my skin wrinkle. I think I'm a little afraid of him."

"Me, too," Sherry said, "and I don't see why. He's a harmless old man with pamphlets, is all. He doesn't expect you to buy 'em, either. Wonder how he lives. He never has a job."

"His feet are righteous," Joe Balaam murmured, "and his mouth is in heaven."

"My!" Sherry commented. "Lyrical, ain't he? Give him another drink, and he'll put it to music."

"Thank you, no," the cop replied. "Brad, some day Mr. Boles will save you."

"From what?"

"I don't know, Brad. I'll tell you when I do."

Joe Balaam went away, the bartender busied himself with tinkling glassware, the radio gave out muted rhythm, and Sherry's eyes found Brad's in the mirror.

"Do you suppose that cop is crazy?" she asked.

"I don't know. Or care. Do you suppose I am?"

"It's common gossip," she said.

His mouth drooped as he examined her reflection: the heart face, the slender throat, the wide blue eyes, the virginal lace collar of her green frock.

"I'm serious," he said.

"Don't go into another spin, dear. Have a beaker of brew. Infallible remedy. What's the matter? Did you have another mental hot flash?"

"Yeah. In the barber shop. My dark angel again."

"What does he say to you? You never tell me."

"And I won't. It's silly. But the visions themselves don't bother me as much as other things I've felt all my life."

"Two more," she called to the bartender. To Brad: "Such as—"

"Such as sudden feelings of aloneness. In a crowd, in a hall, in the orphanage when I was a kid, all of a sudden there was nobody but me in the world, and I was afraid. It's a queer fear,

because it has no name. When it gets me, I'm not located anywhere. I'm loose in time and space, with no place to go. Nobody wants me. Worse, nobody knows me."

Her eyes lost their wisecracking twinkle, her mouth its twist. "Yeah," she whispered. "I know."

His eyebrows questioned.

"At night," she continued, "you look out your window at stars and hear the small wind and smell the lonely flowers. Somewhere out there is destiny, with form and shape and color, only you can't quite see it—and you're lost."

"And afraid," he added, "and you don't know your own name."

"Did you say two more?" the bartender asked.

Sherry started, grinned. "Thanks, pal, for breaking us up. I don't know where we were headed, but we were sure on our way."

"A couple of mystics, we," Brad murmured.

"Excuse this child a moment," Sherry said, and swung away on slim, shining legs toward the rest room.

As Brad poured his fresh bottle, he felt the Call all about him, in the whisper of the radio, in the mutter of outside traffic, in the barely audible foaming of his beer. He fought against the relaxation which allowed his visions to materialize, but stealing up from his vitals crept a lassitude which set his bottle aside, relaxed his hands, and closed his eyes.

And the daytime dream came again, sharply etched.

The scene was a cave. For the first time, his vision had a setting. Around a stone conference table in this brightly lighted cave were a number of dark men. Brad recognized one. Oh, yes. He who called himself an angel, this time haranguing not Brad but his fellows. They listened, eyes on the sleek, dark speaker.

"The time is now, brothers," he said. "The Old One has ordered. This man is the hybrid we seek."

"He is not immortal, himself," one of the council observed.

"True, brother, but he carries the seeds of those great ones who walked the earth for a time. He can conceive an immortal with the girl. She, too, has been found. They will mate. We need accomplish only that. Only that, but against shrewd enemies. We must be adroit. We must—"

"Did you pass out," Sherry asked in Brad's ear, "on only one drink?"

He snapped erect, shook his head, and found reality again. And fear, a vague, formless uneasiness.

"Something's going to happen," he said. "Something bad."

"Come on out of that crystal ball," Sherry said. "Drink your drink. We've got a paper to get out this week. The trouble with you is, you're a romantic Irishman."

"There is no romance in McClain any more. There is hopelessness, and restlessness, and—"

"And biliousness," she broke in. "Look, Butch, you've been working too hard. Now that there's some money in the bank from the gas campaign, why don't you hire a reporter? He could cover the city hall and the county offices, and you could spend your time on editorials, make-up, and interviewing the screwballs."

"Whose name is legion."

"Why don't you? You can shake some politician down for enough to pay an extra salary. Promise your support in the fall elections. Hm-m-m?"

"All right, all right. So I'm a weakling. So I've got to have help to get out a four-page weekly tabloid. So I can't cover the beats any more. That hardening sound you hear is my arteries. I'm an old man at twenty-eight."

"You'll wind up a corpse in a few minutes, with a beer bottle between your eyes, talking like that to me. I'm only thinking of your health, stupe."

"O. K., Sherry. I guess I'm upset. Sorry. We'll hire a reporter. Let's get back to work."

A soft trumpet fanfare from the radio halted him halfway to the door.

"Turn it up," he said to the bartender.

From the radio: "Results, sixth race, Santa Anita. Winner, Milomin; place—"

"Thanks," Brad called. To Sherry: "With that ten bucks, we'll buy champagne."

"How come you always win, Brad?"

"I know the horses personally."

They crossed with the flow of traffic to their building, walked up to the third floor, and as they turned into the corridor at the end of which were the *Independent* offices, halted at sight of a silent tableau.

Mr. Boles, arms half spread like the wings of a fighting bantam cock, glared at a dark, slender man who very nearly cowered in the corner. Cowered, perhaps, but his bright black eyes were flashing hot and steady on Mr. Boles.

They did not speak, the old man and the dark, but a bitter hatred lay almost tangibly between them. A battered hat seemed to crouch on Mr. Boles' white hair, his baggy jeans seemed to have stiffened with resentment, and his round face was a ball of anger. The dark stranger seemed to quiver with a mixture of fear and contempt, his pointed face a mask of fury, his lips slanting down in a thin slash of color.

"All right, boys," Sherry said. "Break it up."

They started, looked at her, and relaxed a little. Mr. Boles let his arms drop, picked up his shopping bag. The stranger came out of his

crouch. A gleam of appreciation for Sherry's fair beauty flickered in his eyes.

"Are you Brad McClain?" he asked.

Brad put his key in the door. "Yeah."

"I'd like to speak with you. I need a job. I'm a hell of a good reporter."

"McClain, take care," Mr. Boles warned. "Have no traffic with this."

Brad looked into the old man's round blue eyes and felt again a queasiness, a crawling of flesh, a fear. He shifted to the black eyes of the stranger.

"You must read minds," he said. "Come in."

"McClain, I've been waiting all afternoon to see you," Mr. Boles complained. "It is important, very important."

"I'm too busy today," Brad said. "Come in tomorrow, or next year."

"McClain, I must speak with you today."

"Some other time."

"You *must*—"

"Go away!" Brad flared. "I don't want to talk to you. I don't have to."

"No," Mr. Boles agreed, "you need not, but you should. You must, eventually. You must."

He stalked away, and a tension lay for a moment in the corridor. Then Sherry pushed through the door, Brad and the stranger followed, and Brad led the way into his office. He waved the young man to a chair, cocked his own feet on his desk.

"I'm Ira Rafel," the stranger said.

"Hello, Ira. This is Sherry Rood."

"Hi."

Ira bowed, resumed. "I'd like to work for you. I think I can make you a lot of money."

"Do tell me more."

"You're shooting at things as they are, and I'd like to help tear 'em down. I can give references. Kansas City *Star*, St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, the AP in New Orleans, UP in Chicago, and so on."

"I don't know how much I can pay you," Brad said.

Ira Rafel shrugged. "I'll gamble."

Brad eyed the dark young man, and something stirred within him, something that hiked the beat of his pulse, something not quite pleasant, but exciting.

"Where have I seen you before?" he asked, trying to place the pointed face, the black hair, the slim body.

Ira Rafel's eyes narrowed in thought. "Dodge City? Brooklyn? Bar Harbor? Tucson?"

"You get around, don't you? I guess I'm mistaken. Maybe I saw you in a—"

Brad broke off his words. In a dream, he said mentally. He felt an even greater excitement as he realized that Ira Rafel's dark face was almost the same, if not quite, as the face in his visions. The same as he who called himself an angel.

"I'm a son of a gun!" Brad said softly. Suddenly he made up his mind. A strong, strange impulse clutched him. "Sorry, Rafel, but I don't need you."

"Why, Brad!" Sherry exclaimed.

Brad shuffled papers on his desk, examined them busily.

"Tell you what," Ira Rafel said. "If I can bring you a story that will make all the wires in the country, give me the job. If I can't, forget it."

Brad raised his eyes. "I'd be a fool not to be interested. By what time?"

"By tomorrow."

"What kind of story?"

"Hell, I don't know. I just hit this town today."

"And you came straight to this office? Why?"

"This is where I belong," Ira Rafel said.

II.

Brad came out of the cigar store with the ten dollars he had won on the sixth race and opened the right-hand door of his coupé.

"Slide over," he said to Sherry. "You drive."

She pulled into thin sunset traffic. "Where do we spend that tainted money?"

"Let's spend all of it in one place for a change. It ought to last until time to go home."

"Maybe, if we nurse it. What place?"

"You pick it."

She stopped the car at an intersection, and while cross traffic flowed with a green light she frowned at him.

"McClain, there's something about us that I don't like."

"Oh?"

"This: Any time we decide to go some place, neither of us will put a name to it. It's always 'whatever you want to do, dear.' Why can't we be like sensible people? They know where they want to go. They go there. They have themselves a time. They go home. That's sanity."

"Can you continue this lecture while driving? Otherwise, you'll get pinched for holding up traffic."

She flung the car into gear, lurched across the intersection, and fought a sudden shimmy in the front wheels for fifty feet. "I wish you'd get a new car. This heap baffles me on quick starts. Well, where to, sire?"

"Why this sudden yearning for sanity?"

"It isn't sudden, and it isn't yearning. We just waste a lot of time wandering around until we find a place."

"Joe Balaam mentioned a joint once," Brad said. "Go to your right at the next intersection. Then go straight till I say different. Joe mentioned music, in addition to food. He had a glow in his eyes."

Again that vision of the inhumanly powerful face floated before him—

"He always has a glow in his eyes. They sing, sort of."

The street wound off into the industrial section between stolid brick and sheet-metal warehouses on which early street lamps threw a pale wash of light and shadow. In the adjoining residential district, lights glowed in the neat bungalows of men who worked in the warehouses and factories. Family groups at dinner tables added a note of domestic tranquillity as Sherry drove steadily into an area of thinning population.

"You must be lost," she said. "I can't see any reason for a joint out here."

"I'm following directions. Joe was pretty definite. Anyway, it's a nice ride. We don't have to poke our gaze through neon to see stars. And you can smell the earth unmixed with carbon dioxide. Fumes, to you."

"Which is what I will do if I don't get a beer soon."

"This is no time of the day to drink beer."

"Any time of the day is all right for beer."

"Here comes a sign. Maybe it's our joint."

Neon letters proclaimed food, drink, and entertainment in the low, white roadside café. Venetian blinds were discreet and suggestive behind huge plate-glass windows. The adjacent parking lot accommodated two or three cars. Sherry stopped beside one of these.

"I still don't see how a place like this can survive in such a location."

"They seem to, somehow. I've seen an occasional joint like this all over the country. No trade to draw from, no near neighbors, but apparently thriving."

As they walked from the car toward the café entrance, a splotch of black on the hill beyond the parking lot caught Brad's eye. He stopped, and Sherry gave an inquiring glance.

He pointed. "What is that?"

"Looks like the mouth of a cave."

"Yeah," he said. "Looks familiar, too, but I can't remember why."

When he continued to stare at the black arch halfway up the low hill, Sherry said: "Remember me? I'm thirsty."

Brad turned angrily. "I almost had it. I was about to remember, but your animal instincts spoiled it."

"Don't be angry, angel."

Angel, Brad thought. The angel, self-styled, of his visions. That was the connection with the

cave. His last daytime dream had been set in a cave, and this cave entrance had simply reminded him of his dream. He shrugged, smiled, was at ease once more. He took Sherry's arm, and they went inside.

A violin was singing, singing under the fingers and bow of a giant who looked like a truck driver. He stood in the center of the long, low room, and wrought minor magic with a left hand large as a saucer but which moved along the finger board with silken grace while his bow flowed across the strings.

Sherry and Brad stood unnoticed inside the door, for the attention of the bartender and half dozen customers was fixed on the flannel-shirted hulk who filled the place with disturbing minor melody. Drinks stood untouched on bar and table tops, the bartender held a glass in one hand, towel in the other, and the customers gazed variously into space or at the floor.

Brad had never heard music like this. It was calm, and rich, and red with a tint of amber. You wanted to listen; you wanted to relax. He did so, and felt the Call. He closed his eyes.

While the fiddle sang to his conscious mind, the face of his angel appeared to his inner vision. A face very like that of his new reporter.

"McClain, you must listen," said the angel. "It is time that facts are known to you. Now the Nephilim will come into their own. The woman is available, and you will know her.

"Think of it, McClain! A certain knowledge that your son will live forever. The name of McClain preserved through centuries. Never before has a man had your opportunity. Not even Da Vinci, who had the intellect of the Great Ones. He did not carry the strain, as do you.

"The father gives the life, and the mother the form," the angel continued. "You have the life in your loins, eternal life. She will give him strength, and courage, and the years will give him wisdom.

"But hurry, McClain! Take her! She is like you in all ways but this: she cannot receive these direct communications. She is like other hybrids in this respect. She feels the loneliness, the nameless need for completion, the little fears, yes. But I cannot appear to her. McClain, hurry!"

The vision faded, and Brad opened his eyes. The bartender still held the unwiped glass; customers gazed at the floor or into space; and Sherry stood with parted lips as the huge violinist tore a poignant closing chord from the throat of his instrument.

The spell was broken, but not forgotten. No applause shattered the hush as the fiddler walked to the bar and took a stool. Slowly, the bartender began to polish the glass, and the customers shifted their eyes and picked up their drinks with absent hands.

"Good heavens!" Sherry whispered. "The man plays like a god, or a devil. I'm limp. Get me in a booth before I fold."

The spell cloaked them again when they were seated. They fixed unseeing eyes on the table, and not until the swart bartender, tired of waiting, gave an impatient cough did Brad look up with a start and give their order.

"Ask the violinist if he'll join us," he added.

"He don't drink, that one," the bartender said. "But he will come and talk with you pretty soon."

While they waited for their drinks, Brad allowed a pressing thought to develop. He felt that all this—the night, the music, his presence here—were somehow connected with his visions. He had no evidence, none at all. He had only a feeling.

And he began to believe, a little, that he had been chosen by Someone, some Thing, some Group, to fulfill a destiny. He knew this might be wishful thinking, and he regarded his new belief with a certain suspicion. Nobody wants to die, he thought, and even though producing an immortal son would be vicariously achieving eternal life and though it was a second-best substitute, it was still desirable.

But what was a hybrid, and who were the Nephilim?

Who was the woman? Sherry?

Sherry, he knew, felt the nameless little fears which were said to mark the hybrid apart. Now and again she felt lost in a busy world. Lost and unknown, in moments of bleak loneliness. She might be the one.

Suppose, however, that she were not. Suppose that he should take her, and find his chosen mate later. That would be awkward, that would cause pain. No, better to wait, better to be sure.

She broke into his reverie by extending a hand, dropping it on his. "I went away for a while," she said. "Why is that?—I wonder. Sometimes a piece of music—a few bars, a phrase—will hang me on the edge of a cloud."

Maybe she is the one, after all, Brad thought.

"I don't really listen to it, at such times," she went on. "I become a part of it, sort of. Whoever is playing it is also playing me, a little. I feel warm inside; I have a lamp in my stomach."

She must be the one, Brad thought.

"Like that thing he was playing," she said. "It was simple, what I remember of it. It didn't have much form. It certainly didn't have an effective setting—an isolated beer joint with shaded amber lights—but it made me feel as if I had a place in the scheme of things. While it lasted, I belonged somewhere. Now I'm lost again. Damn it!"

Brad turned his hand under hers, curled fingers around it.

"Now, all I am is thirsty," she said.

Brad looked up to see the lithe, dark bartender coming with bottles and glasses. He poured a dollop into each glass, doled out napkins and an ash tray.

"That Fiero is coming," he said, "but not for a little while. He feels her deep, that music. He wish to think for a minute maybe."

"Fiero is the fiddler?" Brad asked.

"Sure. Pretty damn good, huh?"

"Pretty damn good."

"You want something, you throw a bottle. Or you just yell, 'Louie.' Me, I'm Louie. Pretty girl you got, Mr. McClain."

"How did you know my name?"

"Joe Balaam, he say you coming tonight with prettiest girl in town. You got to be McClain, because she's the prettiest girl, by golly."

Sherry raised her glass, grinned. "Will you put it in writing, sir?"

"Sure. Well, I wash those damn glasses some more. You want something, you yell, or start a fire."

"My!" Sherry said, when Louie had gone. "That crystal ball of Joe Balaam's gives us no privacy."

Brad shrugged. "That could be reasoning. He told me about this place a few days ago. Today, I won money on his tip. When I have money, I spend it. So—"

"It *could* be reasoning. But me, I hold out for the crystal ball. It's more romantic. I could hold out for Fiero, too, speaking of romance. He's pretty, that one. How come the name?—I wonder. That curly brown hair never came out of Italy, except maybe by way of Sweden."

Brad felt a sudden tiny alarm. He looked at the gigantic Fiero at the bar and saw how any woman could be stirred by the arrogant cant of the big, clean head, the lilt of wide shoulders, the lean torso, the long straight legs. Not to mention the music that took you away from all this. Beside Fiero, Brad felt that he cut a meager figure.

As he examined this possible rival, he reached a decision. Whether Sherry was the one mentioned in his vision or not, she was the one for him. He half turned his head to ask her to marry him, but arrested the motion as Fiero looked across the room, smiled, and came to the table, violin in hand.

He stood at their table, saying nothing, and hung a crooked grin over his square chin. Brad rose and shook hands.

"I'm Brad McClain."

"Joe told me," Fiero said.

"And Sherry Rood," Brad continued. "Sit down, have a drink."

Fiero shook his head at the latter invitation, hesitated over a choice of seats, and slid in beside Brad. He smiled across the table at Sherry, and pulled a gentle thumb across the strings of his violin.

"You play phenomenally," Sherry said. "You put me clear out."

Fiero smiled.

"I've never heard your name," Brad said. "Have you played professionally very long?"

Fiero shook his head. "I'm an archaeologist."

"Oh? Fiddling is a hobby?"

"A gift."

"I wish I could hear more," Sherry said dreamily. "Will you play for me sometime?"

Fiero nodded.

"Yes, do," Brad said shortly.

Fiero smiled gently, got to his feet, and cupped the fiddle under his chin. With his eyes on Sherry, he played a little melody.

Despite his young resentment of interlopers between himself and Sherry, Brad was caught up in the gay, lilting tune. It capered like a lamb on a hill covered with springtime. It flickered like a hummingbird in bright blossoms. It floated like a feather on the wind. Brad lifted the corners of his mouth and tapped his glass with a fingertip.

Fiero ended on a brilliant, broken chord, nodded shortly and walked away.

"An uncommunicative cuss," Brad commented.

"For my money," Sherry said, "he communicates plenty."

"So I noticed," Brad replied. He was silent for a second. "What are we doing here, anyway?"

"I'm having fun. Are you?"

"Yes, but I don't mean that. We come out on a blind chance, and everybody in the joint is expecting us? Why? You'd think it was arranged." He thought of his vision. "Maybe it was, maybe it was. Let's get out of here."

"What's eating you, my chuck?"

"All of a sudden I'm afraid I'm not a free moral agent any more. The hell with it. They can't shove me around."

"They?"

"Yes, they. Never mind who. Maybe I'm being silly, but let's go."

He beckoned to Louie, pulled money from his pocket. Louie's black eyes were wide and amazed as Brad handed him the ten-dollar bill.

"You not going already? Joe Balaam, he is coming. He will meet with you here, Mr. McClain. He was telling me he will be coming."

Brad looked at Louie, then at Sherry. "I'm confused."

"Let's have another beer," she said.

"I'll join you," said a new voice, and Joe Balaam stepped up beside Louie.

He shook hands around, waved to Fiero, and sat beside Sherry. "I expected to arrive earlier, but I encountered your new reporter, Brad."

"So? What's he doing?"

"Digging like mad into a story. He'll have it by tomorrow. He predicts it will make your hair curl."

"Then," Sherry said, "maybe you'll be pretty, like Fiero. Who is he, Mr. Balaam?"

"Just one of the boys," Balaam said. "An amateur scientist, and an incredible—but you've heard him play."

Sherry licked her lips. "Mm-m-m!"

Brad tried a shot in the dark. "Where does he fit in?"

Joe Balaam looked puzzled. "Fit in? Into what?"

"Into the scheme."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Brad."

"How did you know we were going to be here tonight?"

"How," Balaam countered, "did I know Milomin was going to come in? I just know those things. I can't analyze my peculiar talent. But it isn't so peculiar, at that. Many persons have flashes of foreknowledge at times. Which reminds me. I have a piece of information for you."

Brad raised his eyebrows, but Balaam cast a worried glance at Sherry. "Perhaps I should have waited until I found Brad alone," he said apologetically.

"Don't let it fret you," Sherry said. "You move out, I'll go powder my nose, and by the time I'm back, we can do some drinking. We've done very little so far, what with cops and fiddlers."

She strode off to the powder room, and Brad waited expectantly. Joe Balaam seemed to have trouble fixing his eyes. They shifted from Brad to Fiero to Louie to his hands.

"Brad, you believe that . . . ah, put it this way: You were going to propose to Sherry?"

"How did you know that?"

"It's in your eyes and your smile, Brad."

"All right, so I was. So—"

"So don't."

"Try to make sense, copper."

"I mean, don't make it hard on her, Brad. If you propose, she'll accept you, but she is not the girl you'll marry."

"Listen, copper. Once I give my word, I'll keep it."

"I know, Brad. You are like that. But you'll never make Sherry your wife."

The man was earnest. Brad felt no doubt of it. It shone in his eyes, matching the glow on his star. It was in the set of his hands, the relaxation of his dark face.

"Well, Joe, I know you're pretty good on the prophecy racket. O. K., I'll hold off any action concerning Sherry." He felt a wrench at his heart and said dully: "Who is this other wench? I assume there is one to keep me from bachelorhood?"

"You'll meet her tomorrow," Joe Balaam said.

"And what happens to Sherry?"

Joe Balaam pointed at Fiero. "He'll keep her busy."

"And he will, too, I bet," Brad said moodily.

III.

Ira Rafel walked across the deserted parking lot toward the cave entrance, toward the pale young dawn spreading behind the hill. He looked neither to right nor left, and he walked swiftly.

Inside the cave, a glow moved before him, revealing dead embers of the fires of tramps and small boys, a rusty tin can, a lost jackknife with a broken blade, and the oddments which boys will bring to a secret meeting place.

Ira Rafel skirted these obstacles and followed the glow to the slanting rear wall of the cave. His step did not falter. He walked through the twenty-foot thickness of solid rock and emerged in the meeting chamber of the angels, a domed cave bright with sourceless light.

He took his place at the head of the stone table and regarded his companions. These were like him in all essential respects—build, dark hair and eyes, pointed faces and slanting lips. They were seven, counting Ira Rafel.

"It is done," he said.

"But the Gypsy suspects," said one of the angels.

"It is not suspicion," Ira Rafel said, "but fear. Balaam was afraid, for the vision I gave him was not like his earlier and truer vision."

"He believed?" asked another angel.

"He believed, but he was afraid. If his fear persists, we shall give him another vision. However, he is not important. McClain is our present concern."

The dark, pointed faces were without expression, the black eyes steady, the slim dark hands relaxed on the stone table.

"He is asleep," Ira Rafel said. "We shall give him a dream which he will not remember clearly. He will be uneasy and troubled because of this inability to remember until he meets the girl today. Then he will be at ease again."

"But, brothers," interrupted an angel, "we have no defense against Fiero."

"Fiero," Ira replied, "will play his part. Now I shall make the dream—"

Brad raised his eyes from a set of galley proofs when Sherry came in, and looked at her with no change of expression.

"Well?" he asked.

"Don't snap at me that way! You act like somebody spilled your drink. What's gnawing at you?"

"Sorry. I feel jittery, like I had a stomach full of doorbells. Did you want something, or is this a social visit?"

"Mr. Boles clamors outside. Wanta see him?"

"Not today, Josephine."

"He's most unhappy."

"*Tsk, tsk, tsk.*"

"You'll have to see him sometime."

Brad thought about Mr. Boles, and a little chill touched his spine. "Send him away. Quick!"

Sherry's eyes rounded, were like deep-blue china. "Yes, sir," she said. She turned to the door. "Yes, sir."

Brad pushed thoughts from his mind, forced himself not to think of Mr. Boles and the strange fear which the old man aroused, shied away from his uneasy feeling that he had dreamed something important last night, refused to contemplate Joe Balaam's prediction that he would meet his future wife today, and concentrated on the proofs.

He was thus absorbed when the click of his door preceded the arrival of Ira Rafel. The reporter tossed a rubber-banded sheaf of paper on Brad's desk.

"There's your story, McClain."

Brad examined the papers. They consisted of three affidavits that Homer Windsor was chief of a narcotic smuggling and peddling ring, and a personal letter signed "Dulcy" which contained a casual reference to Windsor's illegal activities.

"Where did you get these?" Brad demanded.

Ira Rafel smiled. "That's confidential. I won't name names, but the person I got 'em from has been blackmailing Windsor for several years with that stuff."

"I don't believe it. I mean," Brad amended, "I can't believe it. Homer Windsor is a—"

"Sure, a pillar of the community. Deputy parks commissioner. An honorary position, without pay. But"—Rafel pointed a slim finger—"he can appoint caretakers and janitors in the park system. What better place, what better way, to push the stuff?"

"I can't print this, of course," Brad said.

"Why not?"

Brad looked at his reporter in honest astonishment. "Sit down." Rafel did so. "I thought you said you'd worked on any number of papers."

"I did."

"Well, didn't you ever learn that you'd better print only reports of legal action? If I print this on my own, I'll be sued for libel from here to hell and back. It would be called a malicious action."

"I thought newspapers were printed for the public good," Ira Rafel sneered.

"They should be. Besides, this stuff isn't evidence. It's only hearsay. It's no good to me, even if it's true, except for blackmail. I could shake Windsor down with it, maybe, if I was that kind of a guy."

"You got any mice in your ancestry?" Rafel asked.

"I'm not afraid, and that kind of talk'll get you hurt. Look. If somebody were to make a formal charge, and if Windsor should be arrested, I could report the event. I could also print such material as was public record. But how do I know this stuff is true?"

"You can take my word for it."

"That's no good. Who are you? You haven't seen Windsor sell dope or buy it. Even if you had, you don't have witnesses. There's a story here, but it isn't ready to break. We'll have to work on it." Brad narrowed his eyes at the slim dark reporter. "You don't seem to know a lot about newspaper procedure."

"No? Listen. A reporter is supposed to dig up facts. All right, I've tossed a few in your lap. What you do about it is your problem. But I've fulfilled my obligation. I said I'd bring you a story that would make the wires. I have. Every man and woman in the country would like to hear about the political boss who was appointed by a grateful mayor, who is respected and admired and pointed out to kids, and who runs the most vicious vice racket there is. You said you'd give me a job if I delivered. What are you going to do about it?"

"I guess the job is yours, all right. But we'll have to trap Windsor. You'd better turn into a cokey and try to get a wire into Windsor. When you're ready, we'll take pix. Then we'll turn the dope over to the F. B. I."

"Why not now, and let them do the work?"

"Because I want this exclusive. When I'm ready to break it, it's my story. Does that satisfy you, or do you want to run the paper?"

Ira Rafel grinned briefly. "I'm satisfied. What do I do now?"

"Just sit tight. I don't know Windsor, but from what I've heard he isn't the type to ruin men and women and kids with dope. I'm going out to see him. If there's anything phony that I can detect, we'll try to get evidence."

Brad gave his card to the butler, and was presently shown into the big, dark library. His examination of the several hundred volumes was interrupted by the entrance of a girl, and at sight of her dark beauty something stirred in Brad.

Is this the one?—he asked himself as she stood slim and hesitant in the doorway. "This gal is fey as a roomful of elves. What big eyes you have, for a little girl. Thyroid trouble? My, what glands can do for beauty! If a guy could control the glandular secretions, he could make all women beautiful. He could make a billion dollars, too. Nice hands, lady. Like Easter lilies, toiling not nor spinning. Not me, though. I'm spinning, allrightallright.

"How do you do?" he said.

She came into the room tentatively, as if she would run away if she didn't like it. Her eyes were wide, as though she were continually amazed. With a gesture of impulsive grace, she took one of his hands in hers and illuminated the room with a delighted smile.

"Father said to entertain you until he could come down. I'm Clare Windsor. Would a cigarette and a drink make you happier?"

"I doubt it," Brad said. "I feel pretty good. But I'm willing to make the experiment purely in the interest of thirst."

She dropped his hand. "Good! What do you drink, this time of day?"

"Would you have any beer?"

She sat on the arm of a chair and frowned. "We have one last case of Wurtzemberger, but it isn't cold. It's being saved for a special occasion. We can't get any more. How do you feel about wine?"

"Strongly. I went through a period of wine drinking. It was bad wine, and I gulped it for the effect instead of sipping for the taste. Sure, I'll grant all the connoisseurs say. Wine is a noble drink. For somebody else, not me."

"A liqueur, then?"

"Well, brandy, maybe. I have simple tastes."

"With soda?"

"Is it good brandy?"

"Very."

"Then why spoil it?"

"Or would you rather have whiskey? You can choose between bourbon, Scotch, rye, Irish, and I think we have a couple of drinks of Southern corn which father picked up in Birmingham."

Brad grinned. "I never heard so much talk about it and saw less liquor. Can I have a glass of water? I'm really thirsty now."

"I'm so sorry," she said, and went swiftly away.

While she was gone, Brad fought a preliminary inward battle. If this was his future mate, he would certainly be using bad technique to expose her father as a vice lord. It was one of the worst methods he knew to win a girl over.

"Miss," he thought, "your old man is a heel, but you're O. K. Let's toss him to the wolves and get married. And by the way, do you inherit all this when he kicks off? I could use some of these books. Somebody ought to use 'em. They don't look as if they've been touched. And the house. Oh, yes, the house. It's like a gilded barn, but we could make love over the intercommunication system if we got lost in different wings."

Joe Balaam had said: "You'll meet her tomorrow." Now was tomorrow, and he had met a girl who made him feel peaceful.

She returned with a tray full of glasses and a bottle of cognac which she set on a low table before a divan. She poured drinks, waved Brad to a seat beside her, and they raised their glasses in salute.

"Tell me about yourself," Brad said.

She raised her dark eyes, wide with their continual expression of slight amazement. "It's soon told. I'm twenty-four, single, unengaged, an orphan, living with father. I've had finishing-school education, where I didn't learn much. I don't have a career in mind."

"Are you happy?"

"Happy? What is that?"

"You got me," Brad said.

"If I were like father, I'd be happy. He doesn't worry, ever. But I'm like mother was. I—" She broke off, flushed. "Here I am, taking my hair down. I never talk this way to strangers. You must have an honest face."

"It isn't much of a face."

She examined it. "On you it looks pretty good."

"On me it's flattering. So you're like your mother. Tell me."

She held her brandy glass in cupped hands, like a dark Hebe. "I get afraid sometimes. I'm all right for a while, then suddenly I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I don't know," she said softly. She repeated, in a whisper, "I don't know."

"She's the one," Brad thought. "She's the one. But I'll check a point."

"Do you daydream?"

She smiled wryly. "And all the good it does me."

"That isn't what I mean. Do you actually see things in these daydreams, or are they just wishes?"

"No, I don't really see things. I almost do, but the picture is just outside my range. It makes me—" She broke off, opened her mouth in astonishment. "Why do I tell you this? I was about to say things you just don't say, not even to yourself."

Brad grinned. "It's my honest face. Some day I'll tell you the real reason, when I know you better."

"Oh? Are you going to know me better?"

"You know I am. Stop fencing. You feel the same things I do about us. Something has happened to you, as well as to me. Right?"

After a short eye-to-eye clash, she dropped hers, set her glass on the table, and went swiftly out of the room again.

Brad smiled.

In the cool, dark library, with a drink in his hand, he was at peace. He felt that he had met the girl for whom he was supposed to search. According to the angel in his vision, the search was over. If those visions were not psychotic maladjustments, if they really originated outside himself, Clare Windsor was the future mother of the

future ruler of the earth.

Anyway, he reflected, what can I lose? She's beautiful, and I feel right with her.

What am I going to do about her old man? Salt of the earth, that's papa. So she thinks, probably. I get him flung in the *jusgado,* it's good-by, Clare. I leave him alone, he sells marijuana to high-school kids who neck in parks. What's the issue here? Simple. It's whether these visions of mine are on the level, or whether I'm a hophead who doesn't need drugs for dreaming.

What's a hybrid? What's a Nephilim? I'm getting gypped. Our son, says the angel, will live forever. How will I know?

Which is more important—what happens to a few cokeys who will buy the stuff somewhere else if Homer Windsor becomes incommunicado, or what happens to the future of the race?

If there's a future of the race, with Junior in the driver's seat. That's what I've got to know, and quick. The old man will be along any minute. Maybe I can have another vision. How do you call an angel?

Brad set aside his drink and relaxed. He concentrated on relaxation, on his toes, calves, thighs, stomach muscles, hands, forearms, biceps, and his neck. He was completely limp, but no vision came. He sat quietly for some time, waiting. Then he poured another drink, and had it in his hands when Homer Windsor entered.

He was not a big man, but under the scrutiny of spectacled dark eyes Brad felt small. He felt like a germ under a microscope. He got to his feet, his own head level with the graying thatch of Homer Windsor, and confidence flowed back into his mind. He shook hands.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. McClain?"

Brad thought quickly. New developments of the past few moments had left him with no planned attack, no calculated explanation.

"It suddenly occurred to me," he said slowly, far behind his thoughts, "that you're a more important man in these parts than most people realize. I thought it would be a good idea if the public knew more about you. Aside from giving you publicity, a series of articles in my paper would do fine things for my circulation."

Windsor considered the suggestion calmly. His keen eyes weighed Brad's bland expression, then shifted as his mind weighed the project. He walked about the room, his deliberate steps making no sound on the thick rug.

"I don't want publicity," he said finally. "I prefer to remain outside the limelight. But I appreciate the thought."

Brad felt inward relief, but kept it off his face. If he had committed himself to print a typical inane biography of a prominent citizen, he would have earned the contempt of Ira Rafel. Windsor's refusal left Brad where he wanted to be, in a position to stall.

"But you're a big shot, Mr. Windsor. People want to know about you. They have a right to know."

Windsor sat on the divan beside Brad. "So? Why?"

"Directly or indirectly," Brad said carefully, "the common man has created your position. Right?"

A glint entered Windsor's eyes. "Not so, and I don't care to discuss it."

Brad rose. "Sure. It's none of my business. Thanks for the interview."

Windsor saw him to the door, gave him a courteous handshake and invitation to return at some vague future date, and Brad walked to his car convinced that Ira Rafel's affidavits told a true story.

On his way to the office, he wondered what he would tell his reporter.

IV.

In the corridor which led to the *Independent,* Brad again interrupted what appeared to be a silent clash between Mr. Boles and Ira Rafel. This tableau differed in intensity, however, from yesterday's.

Whereas a flaming hatred had flickered between the old man and the dark reporter, now there was only resentment. Resentment between them, and a touch of fear in the set of Ira Rafel's shoulders. The reporter's hot glance was steady on the bright blue eyes of Mr. Boles, but his thin mouth was a little too tense, his shoulders a little too square. He was afraid.

Mr. Boles, on the other hand, was calm and contemptuous. His face was steady, his hands relaxed, his feet at ease on the marble floor.

They didn't speak, but Brad had a fleeting impression that they communicated. "What gives?" he asked.

They looked at him and relaxed. Ira Rafel raised a slim hand. "I'll see you inside," he said and went through the door.

Brad sighed, twisted his mouth at Mr. Boles. "Well, you've been haunting me for a few days. Let's get it over with. What do you want?"

Mr. Boles adjusted the weathered hat more firmly on white hair and picked up his shopping bag. "There is no longer any need for warning, McClain."

"Were you going to warn me? Against what?"

"There is no need," Mr. Boles repeated and started to brush past.

Brad put a hand on his arm. He either felt or imagined that he felt—he could not be sure—a shock. He jerked his hand away.

"O. K.," Brad muttered. "O. K." He pushed

through the door and slammed it behind him.

Sherry waggled a two-finger salute as he went into his own office where Ira Rafel waited. Brad sat at his desk, lit a cigarette with deliberation, and puffed for a moment.

Then, "I think you're off the beam," he said.

Ira Rafel crossed his ankles, leaned back in his chair, and waited.

"About Homer Windsor, I mean," Brad continued. "He was pleasant, like I was a member of the family. He answered questions freely. He's all right."

Ira Rafel said nothing.

"Of course," Brad floundered, "I know that doesn't mean a lot. But I play my hunches, and this one says lay off."

Ira Rafel waited, black eyes expressionless.

"Why am I apologizing?" Brad flared. "I'm publishing this paper. If I don't want a story, I don't want it. I don't need reasons."

"What do I care?" Ira Rafel said. "I fulfilled my obligation. You can cut valentines from those affidavits for all of me. What do I do now?"

"Relax. I got to think out something."

Brad closed his eyes and considered possible reasons for his having dropped the Homer Windsor story without conscious deliberation. Properly handled, it could bring him a certain brief fame—if it were true. On this latter score, he had little doubt.

It's true, all right, he thought. Old man Windsor is as phony as a dime-store wedding ring. Is it because I was smitten by Clare, or because I have come to believe these screwball visions that I am laying off the old man?

If I believe, I've got to skip him. Not only would I ruin my chances with Clare, but I'd be messing with an unimportant factor in my life. If my son is to rule the earth, let him handle such abuses. McClain blood will tell. The sun of vice will set when the son of McClain rises. Go get 'em, Junior!

But how can I believe? I got to have proof. Maybe these dreams are paranoic. Me and Jeanne d'Arc. Visions. Hers were supposed to have been on the level. Maybe mine are, too. But how can I tell?

Suddenly without warning, Brad felt the Call, and the angel appeared again. The dark face, the black eyes the straight hair.

"It's true, McClain. You are of the Nephilim, as is the girl. Have no further doubts. You need no sign. You need faith and the will to act."

Brad fought to open his eyes, to look at Ira Rafel while the image of the angel was sharp in his mind. He struggled against the lassitude which made him limp, and when he finally wrenched free he was gasping with effort, wet with cold sweat, weak with strain. He eyed Rafel and pointed a shaking finger.

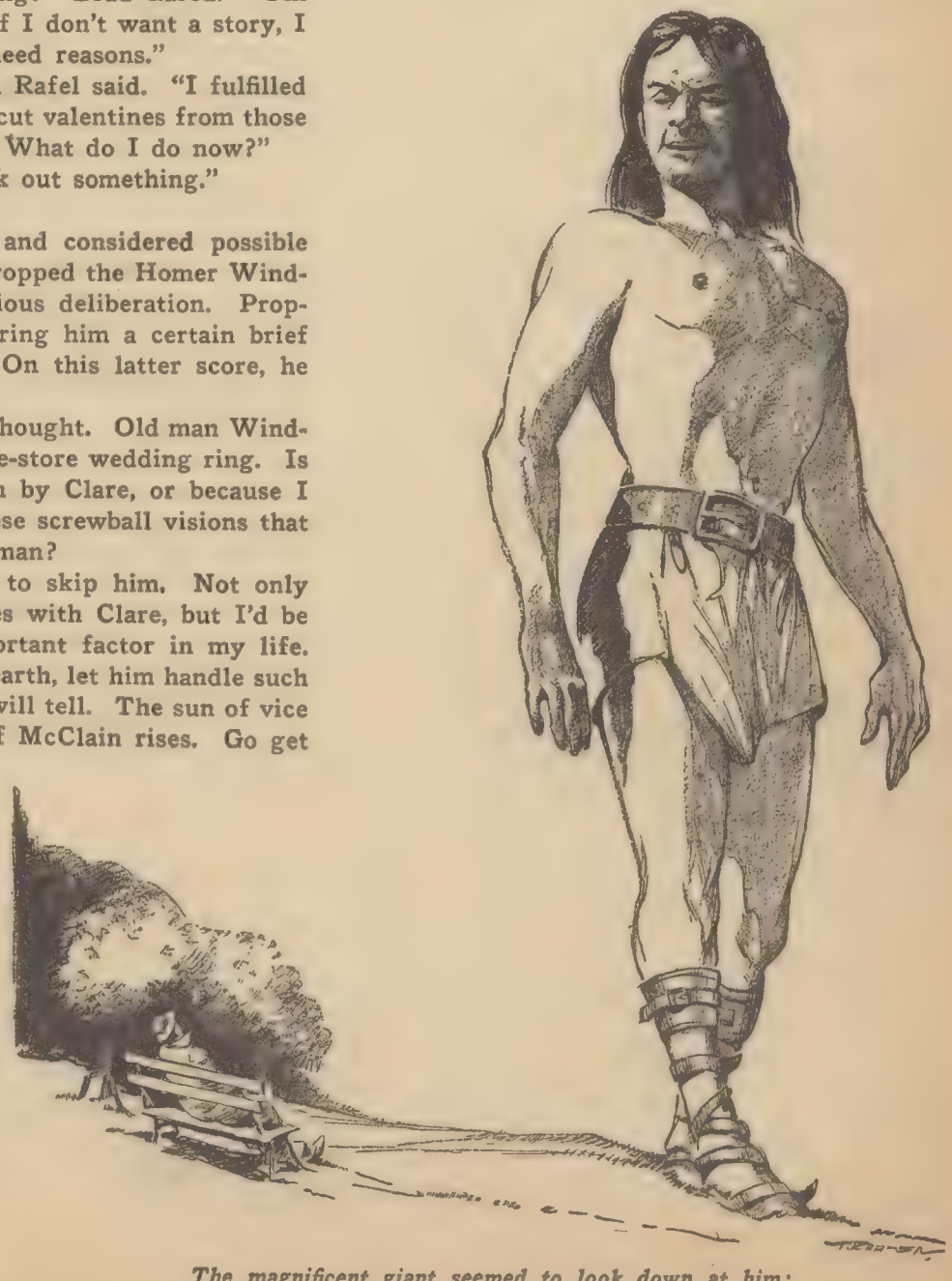
"Who . . . who are you?"

Rafel's eyes widened. "Are you nuts?"

"Wh-who are you?" Brad repeated.

"You can see, can't you? Do you want a birth certificate?"

"There's something wrong about you, Rafel.



The magnificent giant seemed to look down at him; the soundless voice of the vision called "Hello, son!"

For instance, what's between you and Mr. Boles? There's something wrong with him, too."

"What's wrong with him?"

"I'm afraid of him, and I don't know why. I'm not afraid of you, but I don't trust you."

"I feel the same about both of you, McClain. I'm afraid of him, and mistrust you. Especially since you went sour on this narcotic story for reasons of sentiment. So what does that make me?"

"I don't know," Brad said wearily. "I don't know. Go away for now. I'll meet you in Washington Park at eight tonight, and we'll sit on a bench. If we see anything funny, I'll go through with the story. I'll play fair with you."

Ira Rafel shrugged, got to his feet, waved a negligent hand, and went out.

Brad stared at the door. Why did I do that?—he asked himself. All of a sudden I felt I had to. Rafel said "for reasons of sentiment." How did he know that? I didn't peep. How did he know?

Sherry came in bright-eyed, but halted halfway to his desk. "You're as white as a goat," she said.

"You mean ghost."

"I mean goat. Your face is smudged. What's the matter, angel? Worms?"

He wiped his face with a piece of copy paper. "Nothing's the matter. Did I get the smudge?"

"Mostly." She took a handkerchief from the sleeve of her tan blouse and rubbed at his cheek. "Guess who's coming."

"That's one of the silliest questions I know," Brad said. "There are a hundred and thirty million people in this country, most of whom are ambulatory more or less. Yet you hear it every day, 'Guess who's coming' or 'Guess who fell down a stair well.' Well, who is coming?"

"Fiero."

"You *did* make an impression."

"No. He's coming to see you."

"So? What do you want me to do—bounce?"

"No. That's my department. Wonder what he wants with you."

"Didn't he say?"

"Nope. I suspect, though, that he'll get through with you quick, and maybe take me to lunch or buy me a drink. Give me some money. He may be broke. I'll buy him a drink, in that event."

"Make out a check, and I'll sign it."

Fiero gave Brad a gentle, shy smile. "Joe sent me."

Brad grinned. "Sounds like prohibition. Remember how 'Joe sent me' was 'open sesame' at speaks? Sit down. What's on your mind?"

Fiero fitted his bulk into the office guest chair with some difficulty and bent a troubled stare on the floor.

"Joe said you'd want to hear a story of mine."

"What kind of story?"

"About giants."

"Always glad to hear how the other half lives," Brad said. He lit a cigarette, tossed the pack to Fiero. "Tell."

"I'm pretty big, you can see," Fiero said. "I'm no record holder, but people look twice at me. It was worse when I was a kid. I felt ashamed. When the boys chose up sides, I was the last one taken because I was awkward. I hadn't learned how to handle my weight. And the girls would just nod to me. They were sorry for me. So was I."

Fiero paused to light a smoke, laid the pack carefully on a corner of Brad's desk.

"When I grew up," he went on, "I got the silly notion that I was a giant, a descendant of those who are targets in mythology for the spears of knights. So I ran down references on giants, from Genesis to Paul Bunyan. And I had to draw the conclusion that, *if* the mythology was based on truth, there was once a race of giants. I mean race in distinction to the human race. There were the human race and the giant race, living together, maybe mingling. I don't know why Joe Balaam thought you'd like to hear about this."

Brad thought of certain terms in his visions: "hybrid," "Great Ones." He sat straighter. "Go on."

"Well, I grew out of the notion that I was a descendant of the giants, but I never lost interest in the theory. And in the last few years I've run into some confirmation. You read about the gigantic fossil footprints in Arizona?"

"No."

"Yeah. I saw 'em. If the body of whoever made 'em was scaled to the prints, he must have been about sixteen feet tall. According to a conservative estimate, they were some four thousand years old. Well, who made 'em?"

"That's a little before my time. I don't know."

"On the face of evidence," Fiero said, "there are two possibilities. Either man was that size in those days and has degenerated to his present stature, or else an actual and distinct race of giants was kicking around."

"And so—"

"Wait. That's one of the points of confirmation. Last year I ran into a hophead who added another. I didn't know he was an addict then. Seemed courteous and refined, but I saw him once later when he was out of stuff. Well, anyway, he and I got to talking outside the public library. He was interested in my size, and he told *me* a story about giants in the earth. Called 'em Nephilim."

"What are they?" Brad snapped.

"Just giants, I guess. I didn't pay too much attention, because he talked a lot about angels. I supposed he was a nice guy but a little bats. I didn't know he was a cokey."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"May be dead, for all I know. Say, Joe Balaam was right. You *are* interested in this."

"I'm going to write a book," Brad explained hastily. "Did you get this snowbird's name?"

"Gerald, as I remember. He's easy to recognize. He's got only one ear. The other got sliced off, it looks like. Maybe in the last war. He's around fifty."

"Where did you see him the last time?"

"Washington Park. He didn't want to talk to me. Seemed to think I was some kind of spy."

"Joe Balaam said I'd be interested, eh? Well, thanks a lot, Fiero. That's all you know?"

"That's the works. If you run into any fresh leads, I'd like to know. By the way, am I horning in where I don't belong if I ask the girl outside for a date?"

"No-o," Brad said, and wondered at his reluctance. "Not at all."

"If she'll go out with me, of course," Fiero said.

"Only one way I know to find out. Ask her."

Brad put his head in his hands when Fiero had gone, and tried to puzzle a pattern into the jumble of statements he had heard. He felt that a definite connection existed not only between his visions and the story of Fiero, but also between the four-thousand-year-old footprint and the future. Somewhere in that mess of myth and conjecture was Brad McClain. He fitted somewhere. But where? And for whom?

A prophetic cop, a drug addict with one ear, and an angel, so called, who looked like his reporter. These seemed to be the existing links in this chain from the ancient past into the future. An investigation was indicated, and Joe Balaam was the easiest to find.

Brad found him without difficulty, and they adjourned to a booth in the State Bar. "Now," Brad said when they had beer, "what goes on?"

Balaam's eyes were puzzled. He waited for Brad to clarify the question.

"Why did you send Fiero to see me?"

"I thought he might have something you could use, Brad."

"Use? How?"

"I never saw a newspaperman yet who wasn't intending to write a book as soon as he found time. Fiero has kicked around the world quite some, and has odd facts. I thought you'd find him interesting."

"I see," Brad said grimly. "I see. Tell me this. How come last night you said I'd never marry Sherry?"

"I had one of those sudden flashes, Brad. I felt that you'd meet a brunette with big eyes."

"A vision?" Brad asked tensely.

"No-o. Almost, but not quite. It was more of a feeling, a certainty, than a picture."

"What are the Nephilim?" Brad asked abruptly.

Balaam gave him a dark blank stare. "The—"

"Nephilim."

"I have never heard the word."

"O. K. Do you know a hophead named Gerald? He's got only one ear."

"I haven't had much contact with the narcotics squad, Brad. I don't know him."

"If he's in town, how could I find him?"

"I'll ask one of the boys in that division."

"I got one more question, Joe. What do you know about giants?"

Joe Balaam opened his mouth to answer, but his eyes shifted, his mouth closed, and his swarthy skin grew a shade lighter. He looked steadily toward the door, and Brad turned his head to see Ira Rafel approaching.

"Glad I found you," Rafel said. "I've had a sudden call out of town and can't keep our date in the park. You can handle it, though. I'll be back tomorrow."

"Sure. Have a drink? You've met Joe Balaam, I believe?"

"We've met. Sorry, no time for a drink."

Brad slitted his eyes at Balaam when Ira Rafel had gone. "What's the matter with you?"

"I don't like that guy. I feel, somehow, that he and I are going to have trouble."

"Well, you can handle him. He isn't very big. Now. What do you know about giants?"

"I was about to say, Brad, that you're the second person who has asked that question. The first was Rafel, last night."

"Rafel?"

"He came up to me and introduced himself. I'd never seen him before and didn't care who he was. But he insisted on starting a conversation. Right in the middle of it, he said, 'If I should say "giants in the earth," what would it mean to you?' "

"And you said—"

"I thought he was drunk, and told him to move on or I'd run him in. He just looked at me. I—well, I came out to where you were. I decided he wasn't drunk, just a fresh kid."

Brad cursed silently as his fruitless vigil moved into its fourth hour, and midnight bonged from a downtown church. He had scrutinized each individual who had moved through the park, tall men, short men, bums, and well-to-do; fat women, thin women. None had had a missing ear, and now the park was deserted and dark under an orange-peel moon. He pulled his coat up against the chill, and relaxed without struggle when he felt the Call. He had fought it before, but not now, not now. He wanted to know.

His vision was set on a vast plain, empty save for a gigantic figure who moved with a great, easy stride. The giant had dark hair and flashing black

eyes. He seemed to look at Brad and uttered a word. It was a strange word, in an unintelligible tongue, but Brad knew its meaning.

"Hello, son."

The giant vanished behind a hill, leaving behind a footprint. Presently, the scene vanished. Brad opened his eyes.

He got to his feet and walked thoughtfully to his car. He had a feeling of exhilaration, of exultation. That great man—man?—had been beautiful, incredibly so. And he, Brad McClain, carried the seeds of that strain.

V.

The voice from the Pillar of Light ceased, and Mr. Boles stood quietly. He kept his eyes down, and did not speak until after a long interval of silence.

"Very well," he said. "I obey. I do not understand, but I obey. I shall assume the guise of the man and tell McClain a little of the truth.

"May I ask permission, my captain? As a member of the Hosts who is loyal, I ask it. Let a place be prepared for the boy and the girl, and let them be removed.

"Let this be done, my captain. Let the adversaries be confused."

Mr. Boles waited, but no words rolled out of the pillar. Gradually, it faded from sight. Presently, Mr. Boles lifted his eyes.

Ira Rafel was waiting when Brad dragged into the office late and puzzled. Brad nodded absently, shuffled the morning mail on his desk, then stared into space.

"I'm just crazier'n hell," he said.

Rafel showed polite interest.

"I'm not very interested in this narcotic yarn," Brad went on, "except as it has brought me into contact with a few factors I've got to clarify. You worry me, Rafel."

"So?"

"You dig up a story that is good in itself, but it ties into a funny experience pattern of mine on two counts. I've got to clear up those points. Listen. What are Nephilim?"

Rafel's expression remained darkly blank. "I don't know. What are you talking about?"

"Immortality, or else I'm just plain crazy."

"You've got a point there," Rafel said.

"Well, maybe you don't know what I mean. Maybe you do. Anyway, I've got a job for you. I want you to find a hophead who is probably named Gerald. He has only one ear. I want to talk to him."

"About Windsor?"

"No. About something else."

"Take a look at the signature on those affidavits."

Brad dug the affidavits out of his desk, thumbed through to a signature. He felt a chill of surprise as he found the name: Mortimer Jerrold.

"Things like this can't happen," he said. "Address and everything. Will you chase over and see if you can find him? This address is three years old, but you might be able to trace him. Take all the time you need, but get him here if you can. Meanwhile, I've got to get a paper out."

When Rafel had gone, Brad sat motionless for some time. He dumped copy and proofs from the printer's envelope, but made no move to sort or read it.

The pattern was here. His visions tied directly into the affidavits which pointed in two directions. One, to Clare Windsor, who apparently fulfilled requirements stated in his visions; two, to Mortimer Jerrold, who might be able to confirm those visions.

Yet, he reflected, even if Jerrold were unavailable for one reason or another, the visions must be more than psychotic trauma. It seemed impossible for pure imagination to link itself with concrete objects of which he had no previous knowledge.

Coincidence is all very well, he thought, but the appearance of Fiero and his statements were a little too pat to be so explained. The arrival of Rafel at the moment when he was needed seemed to be more than coincidence.

Clare Windsor seemed indicated as the desired end result. He picked up his phone, and after considerable questioning of officials he knew at the City Hall, secured Windsor's unlisted number and fingered it to life.

"I'm the whirlwind that blew into your heart yesterday," he said, when she had finally been summoned. "I want to see you again."

"It's impossible," she said.

"Nothing's impossible."

"But I'm going away. Father and I. Tonight."

"Where, and for how long?"

"I'm not supposed to tell you."

"Where, and for how long?"

"I can't tell you, Mr. McClain."

"Look, Miss Windsor. Has it ever occurred to you that we have our own lives to live? Did you ever consider that the selfishness of parents has caused more damned unhappiness than almost any other factor in our social structure? You know as well as I that your father isn't snatching you away from me for your own good. You may not admit it, but you know it. Now. Where, and for how long?"

She made no response for so long that Brad started to speak again, but checked himself as she said, "I'll see you this afternoon somewhere."

"At your house?"

"No. Not here. I'll come to your office."

"It's only fair to warn you that if you get on

my own ground you may never get away."

"I'll . . . I'll take the chance."

He gave her directions, set a time, and went to work. He proofread the galleys, dispatched them by messenger to the print shop, and was making up the dummy when his door opened to admit a mild-looking man with gray hair, gray eyes, gray skin, and one ear. He smiled nervously with thin lips and came into the office.

"I believe you are looking for me."

"Are you Mr. Jerrold?" Brad asked.

"I'm sorry that I didn't come sooner. Unfortunate and unforeseen delay. Forgive me. How can I serve you?"

"Are you Mr. Jerrold?"

"You, sir, have a strange problem. I have a solution equally as strange. You wish to ask me questions?"

"Sit down," Brad said. "We'll skip the preliminaries on how I heard of you and so on. What are Nephilim?"

"Giants. The word is Hebrew, and so defined in Webster's revised unabridged dictionary."

"I never thought to look it up," Brad said. "What kind of giants?"

"According to the sixth chapter of Genesis, they were the progeny of angelic fathers and human mothers. Mighty men of old, men of renown, they were called. They are probably responsible for so much mythology in which giants play a part."

"Part angel, eh? Got any more dope on 'em?"

The gray man tugged at his remaining ear. "I can give a few details, based on inference and partly on a record I have seen. Their size is problematical, but they were giants in the old days before man had degenerated to his present stature. Giants intellectually as well as physically, I suspect, else why men of renown? Perhaps they perfected the now lost arts of tempering copper. Perhaps they built the pyramids in Egypt. At any rate, they towered above their less divine contemporaries, and established reputations for great strength, wisdom, and appetites. It is said that they were ravenous, devouring singly as much as ten sheep at a meal. While they existed, they made an indelible impression on the history of man."

"Did they die?"

"Doubtless. In the Flood, all but Noah and his cargo perished. There were no Nephilim in the ark, according to available records."

"Suppose one or more survived the Flood."

"They did not."

"But just suppose," Brad insisted. "What then?"

"For the sake of argument, I should say that they would mate with available humanity."

"And have descendants?"

The gray man shrugged.

"You say they drowned in the Flood," Brad said. "Well, I was told yesterday of tremendous fossil footprints found in Arizona. Who made 'em? I think I know. I saw one—"

Brad trailed off into silence. He felt foolish. To tell this stranger of that beautiful giant in his vision and of footprints left on an empty plain would brand him as mentally defective. Who would believe? He himself was not without doubt of his sanity. You don't talk about the secret things.

You don't say: "Look at me. I'm part angel."

You don't say: "My son will rule the earth."

You feel it, maybe. You don't talk about it. Nor do you tell of the nameless little fears which, according to the angel in his visions, are the true mark of the hybrid. That word now had significance. It brought into focus many tales that have been handed down through the years.

"Look," he said to the gray man, "the mythology of most peoples contains giants. Why? You don't dream up a giant; you don't dream up an elaborate pattern of conflicts unless they had an actual basis. Take Paul Bunyan. I know you'll say he's a myth, but you'll have a fight on your hands if you say it in some of the North woods."

"I wasn't going to say anything," said the gray man, tugging again at his single ear.

"Many lumberjacks," Brad went on, "will swear to Paul clearing a hundred acres in a day, with or without the aid of five thousand brown bears. Maybe there's a fact way back in the story somewhere. How's this for a theory? Suppose that one or more of the Nephilim escaped the Flood, and scattered the seeds of the hybrid race. Then many so-called human beings are part angel, hybrids. Well?"

The gray man shrugged.

"Then how can you explain the sports?" Brad demanded. "How do intellectual and/or physical giants suddenly occur in colorless and unexceptional families? They're throwbacks to something. Why not to Nephilim?"

"All right," the gray man said mildly. "Why not?"

Brad was caught up by his thought. "They have to be throwbacks," he said with passion. "They don't evolve. The process of evolution is slow and painstaking. Then how else can you explain Abe Lincoln, Genghis Khan, Einstein? How else explain genius, except by angelic heritage? I'm right, I tell you. I have to be."

What am I doing?—he suddenly asked himself. I'm making a speech. I'm dreaming out loud. I'm cutting a mental niche in eternity for McClain. What does this guy care? This hophead, with pinpoint pupils.

"Mr. Jerrold," he said, "thanks. You've cleared up points that have worried me."

The gray man with one ear got to his feet, bowed

primly, and went out the door. Five minutes later, Brad suddenly realized that he had made no future appointments, had not checked the man's address. He did not want to lose touch. Well, no matter. Rafel would know how to find him.

The pattern was now complete, with Clare Windsor as the final figure. His daytime dreams, the restless Call which preceded them, came from outside himself. They had to be true. They had to be.

Sherry came in, her gay peasant skirt and blouse contrasting with the mildly cynical slant of her mouth.

"I thought you'd died." She examined him. "It's hard to tell sometimes, but I guess there's no need to phone the morgue."

Brad blinked. "Why the obscurity?"

"I'm not being obscure. You've been in here alone for nearly an hour, with not even one cry for beer. Solitude may cleanse your soul, but it doesn't help my thirst."

Brad blinked again. "Alone? My good woman, you're nuts. What's the gag?"

Sherry's eyes widened. "No gag at all. Nobody's been in since Ira left. That was more than an hour ago."

Brad frowned. "Go away. I'm in no mood for games."

Sherry sat on his desk, took cigarettes from his shirt pocket and lit two. "Let's start over again," she said. "All I want to say is, I'm thirsty. You've been free since you sent copy to the printer. Let's go get a beer."

Astonishment made an O of Brad's mouth; uneasiness froze it. After a couple of seconds, he sighed with relief and smiled. "You've been asleep."

Sherry's eyes were frankly puzzled. "Not that I'd mind if you knew it, but I haven't been asleep. What's this all about?"

"It's all right, Sherry," Brad said tolerantly. "You can't be up all night with fiddle players, and not feel beat down the next day."

"How did fiddle players get into this?" she wailed.

"Weren't you out with Fiero last night? He said he was going to ask you."

"He did. I'm going out tonight with him. In the meantime—" She made a helpless gesture. "Let's forget the whole thing. I'm confused."

"You're just not quite awake yet."

Sherry got to her feet. "Listen," she said in level tones, "I'm beginning to weary of this sleep gag. Your explanation better be good."

"My sweet," Brad said patiently, "please understand me. I don't give a damn if you fall asleep on the job. It makes no difference, see? But why tell me an elaborate lie? It isn't necessary. I won't fire you."

"You won't have to," she grated. "I've quit. Gimme my check."

"No, dear," Brad said gently. "Let me tell you. A man came in here, through your office. Mortimer Jerrold. One ear, gray hair. We talked. We talked for some time. Then he went out again, through your office. You were either gone or asleep. I don't care which, understand? It's all right."

Sherry backed one full step away. "Brad, you're cra—you're wrong. I've been at my desk all morning, and nobody—nobody—came in."

Brad drew himself up. "Let's forget it."

"No, Brad! You seeing angels is one thing. It could happen to anybody—maybe. But this. I swear nobody came through my office."

"I'd rather not hear any more about it."

She looked at him for a long time. "All right. All right, Brad. I won't mention it again."

She sidled toward the door, not shifting her bewildered eyes from him. Bewildered, a little hurt.

"Will you go have your lunch now?" Brad asked coldly. "I'm expecting a visitor, and intend to leave at that time. Do you mind?"

"Not at all," she said softly. "Not at all."

"Thank you."

A great depression settled on Brad as he puzzled over Sherry's action. She never lied. She didn't think it was ever worth the trouble. She claimed to have a poor memory, claimed an inability to keep falsehoods straight in her mind. So why this? Why lie about so trivial a matter as dozing off in an empty office?

He sighed. He was unhappy. He and Sherry were as close as possible in a somewhat platonic relationship. He knew the depth of her affection for him. It matched his for her. Now she had driven a wedge of distrust and evasion between them. He sighed again.

He paced the floor for a few moments. He opened the connecting door into the reception room, so that he could see Clare when she arrived. He sat at his desk again, and divided attention between his wrist watch and the door.

It opened a few minutes before the time set for their date, and not Clare but a stranger entered. A stocky man with a smart blue hat slanted on sandy hair came deliberately into Brad's office and fixed him with flat blue eyes.

"You're McClain?"

"I don't like your tone, bud."

"Want to talk to you."

"There's no law. But hurry. I'm expecting company."

"You're expecting Clare Windsor. She's not coming."

Brad reached for the telephone. "No?"

The sandy-haired stranger, with no expression

in his flat blue eyes, slapped Brad's hand away from the phone. "No."

Brad stood up. "Maybe you'd like a foot in your face."

The stranger slid a hand under his double-breasted coat. "Maybe I would. Sit down."

"My!" Brad said. "Gangsters, just like the movies." He sat back in his chair and waited. "All right. You've got the edge. Talk."

"Stay away from Clare Windsor."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"Then go to hell."

The stranger said nothing, did not remove his hand from under his coat.

Brad's flame of anger dimmed. He eyed the man calmly and made some mental calculations. "Homer Windsor sent you here."

The man shrugged.

"You can take him a message," Brad said. "I'm hep to his racket, and I'm holding off mainly because of his daughter. But if he sends any more punks to see me, or if he sends her out of town, I'll bust it wide open. Now scram, before I make you eat your gun, or whatever it is, raw."

"It's a gun, all right." The man removed his hand, filled with a dull automatic, backed to the door and kicked it shut. He pointed the gun at Brad. "You talk a lot. What do you mean, his racket?"

"You're not thinking of shooting me, are you?"

"Maybe."

"You damned fool, you couldn't possibly get away."

"That's my headache. What do you mean, his racket?"

As objectively as he could, Brad considered the situation. He could see no possible profit in bravery, in foolhardy assertion of his virility.

"It was a gag. I don't know from nothin'."

"Yeah? You better come with me. I know better places to talk."

Brad shook his head. "Nuh-uh. I'm staying."

The man came across the room on the balls of his feet. "Listen, rat-face. I'm not playing."

"Nor I. If it's trouble in my lap, I'd rather hold it on my home ground. What do you want?"

"No back chat. You can walk out on your own feet, or somebody'll carry you out behind 'em later. Make a quick choice."

"I've made it."

The gun barrel moved fractionally, and with the motion Brad flung himself to one side and hurled a fistful of papers at the gunman. His chair spilled him against one end of the desk and pinned him momentarily. In a fragment of time that seemed to be eternity, Brad tensed his shoulders for the shock of a bullet. He felt no shock, he heard no shot, and gave the chair a frantic shove. As he scrambled to his feet, he became aware of a medley of puffs, grunts, and thudding blows.

A whirlwind had entered the office, a dark, lithe, incredibly quick whirlwind. Ira Rafel. The reporter seemed to be all fists and feet. The former made a pulp of the stranger's face; the latter doubled him over in gasping agony which presently became unconsciousness.

Ira Rafel looked down at the puffy face, the twisted body. "Messy, ain't he?" he commented to Brad.

"Thanks," Brad said. "How did you get here?"

"I was listening at the door."

"What'll we do with him?"

"Heave him out the window."

"Hell, we don't want to kill him."

"Why not? We'll be doing him a favor."

"And hang for it."

Rafel nodded. "I forgot about that. Well, I'll take him out and lose him. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"Wait," Brad said. "What are you going to do?"

"Lose him, that's all. He won't bother you again."

"I don't like the way you talk," Brad said. "It makes me feel funny."

Rafel shrugged. "All right, all right. He's your pigeon. Do what you like with him. I'll report on my assignment, and leave you with him."

"By the way," Brad said, "you did a good job. Mortimer Jerrold was in, and we had a long talk."

Ira Rafel looked at Brad with no expression on his thin, dark face. "Mortimer Jerrold has been dead for six months," he said.

VI.

Brad's first reaction brought a sense of shame. He had criticized Sherry for insisting he had had no visitor, had spoken to her as if she were an employee instead of a friend, had patronized her. She had been right. Ira substantiated her statements.

He stared at the chair in which the gray man had sat, which had been overturned in the scuffle between Ira and the gunman who lay beside it in twisted unconsciousness. He picked up the automatic, absently removed the clip and ejected the shell in the firing chamber. He did not move his eyes from the chair as he reconstructed in his mind the scene with Mortimer Jerrold.

Finally, he shrugged, grinned. "You had me going for a minute," he said to Ira Rafel. "Somebody gave you a bum steer. He was here for forty minutes or so. Gave me some information I wanted and hinted at more."

Ira did not answer. He stood over the gunman in an attitude of listening. Not with his ears

alone, but with his fingertips, his whole body, his sleek dark hair.

Brad had a flash impression that Ira Rafel was listening to sounds not related to the lazy mutter of traffic in the street below, the heavy breathing of the unconscious man, the noon whistles. Cosmic sounds, perhaps.

"He *was* here," Brad said stoutly, "or else I'm really crazy."

Sherry came back from lunch on this line, said: "You're sane as a bedbug. Everybody knows that." She saw the man on the floor. "Well! Company?"

"Among others," Brad said pointedly.

"Listen!" she snapped. "For all I care, you had a mixed quartet in here. Anything you dreamed up is O. K. with me. But they didn't come through my office. I was fully conscious all the time. Falling asleep is what I do least of best. So drop it, or I go."

"That argument," Ira broke in, "seems a little beside the point at the moment. We have a body with us."

"All right," Brad said. "Let Mr. Jerrold ride for a while. Our friend, here, is going to come to in a minute. What then?"

"What happened?" Sherry asked.

Brad told her the gist of it, not mentioning Clare Windsor. "Ira wanted to toss him out the window."

"Let's take him up on the roof and scatter him to the four winds," Sherry suggested.

"It seems anticlimactic as hell to pat him on the head and send him about his business," Brad said. "But I don't know of anything else."

"This may seem obvious," Ira said, "but why not turn him over to the cops. He's violated legal rules of behavior, hasn't he?"

Brad and Sherry stared at the reporter. "Don't you know *anything* about politics?" Brad asked.

"How did politics get into this?"

"Look," Brad said patiently. "If the story you dug up is true, if Windsor is a behind-the-scenes boss here, this guy would be out of jail in five minutes, even if we could get him arrested. Which I doubt."

"Joe Balaam might take him in," Sherry suggested.

"He's part of the system, too. Has to be, to hold his job."

"It doesn't seem right to me," Ira said. "This is a democracy."

Brad looked at the reporter with puzzled suspicion. "You told me that you worked in Chicago, Kansas City, and New Orleans. Did you never open your eyes? Three of the most machine-ridden cities in the country; until they were cleaned up—temporarily, at least. All you need is about half sense to see it. It's damned strange to me that you'd even hint that this lug could be prosecuted. You ought to know more about practical politics than that."

"If you boys can separate yourselves from each other's throat," Sherry cut in, "I'd like to point out that the patient is going to recover."

The man on the floor stirred. Presently he opened his less-swollen eye, pried at the other for a futile moment, and sat up.

"What hit me?"

"You got No. 1," Sherry said, "of our six easy lessons in etiquette. Drop in often."

The man slid a hand under his coat, pulled it out empty and looked up at Brad. "What now?"

"Maybe you'd better talk."

"I don't know anything."

"Why did Windsor send you down here?"

"Who?" the man said.

Sherry broke in. "Why argue with him? Kick him in the stomach and say he fainted."

"Again!" Ira asked, and moved a step closer.

The man looked up at Ira. "You're the guy, huh? How did you take me? I'm twenty pounds heavier than you."

"He eats up all his oatmeal every morning," Sherry said. "Are you going to tell us what we want to know, sonny?"

"No," said the man. "All you can do is kill me. That's not as bad as what I'd get if—" He checked himself.

"If what?" Brad prodded.

The man said nothing.

Brad sighed. "We can't do a thing. Besides, this guy isn't to blame. He's just an office boy." To the man: "Tell us your name and beat it."

"His name is Phil Douglas," Ira said, "and he's wanted for robbery in Rhode Island."

"Philip," the man corrected. "And it's not robbery. It's breaking and entering." He gave Ira a wide, one-eyed stare. "How did you know?"

"I saw your picture on a Providence post-office circular, let's say."

"Well, you got the whip hand," said Philip Douglas. "What you going to do?"

"Nothing," Brad said. "Scram. But tell Windsor to lay off. He's the guy I'll be after, not you."

When Douglas had gone, the trio were silent for a moment. Then Sherry said, "What I'd like to know is, what goes on?"

Brad went to a filing case, opened a drawer marked "Civil Liberties," took out a bottle of bourbon asserted to have been bottled in bond. He brought the carton of paper cups from the water cooler, and set the assortment on his desk.

"I'm going to get drunk. Unbend your elbows if you're interested."

"Not I," Ira said. "I'd like to watch, though."

"I never refused a bottle in my life," Sherry

said. "Is there a reason for this, or are we just drinking?"

Brad poured two drinks. "When a guy who has been dead for six months, and who didn't come in at all, sits in my office and tells me things I've been wanting to know for a week—when that happens while I'm sober, think what I could do stinko."

He eyed Sherry and Ira suspiciously in turn. "What are you two trying to do to me?" When this aroused nothing but puzzled frowns, "Listen," he said evenly, "I don't mind a gag, as long as it's good. This one isn't. It isn't even funny. I don't like it, see."

He poured himself another drink, gulped it.

"If I have funny daydreams, that's one thing. But this wasn't, and there's no use your pretending it was. He was here. I saw him. I talked to him. I'm not crazy, do you understand? I'm sane. So why are you trying to make me think I'm loopy?"

"Stop flagellating yourself," Sherry snapped. "We aren't gagging. I don't know whether your visitor was dead or not. I do know that he didn't come through my office. So he wasn't here, unless he crawled out of the woodwork. Don't think; drink. With me." She held out her paper cup.

Brad filled it. "What I can't figure is your motive. I've always treated you well, Sherry. When there's money, you always get your check on time. And you, Rafel, a tramp reporter out of a job, what do I do? I give you one. I give you a chance to prove you're some use. You don't have to bat around on freight trains any more. You don't have to chisel eggs at back doors any more. You don't have to steal your clothes from backyard washings any more. You got a job; you got a home. It's a hell of a way for both of you to treat me."

He poured himself another drink.

"What good do you get from this gag? What fun do you have? You can't make me think I'm nuts. I know I'm all right. I know that Mortimer Jerrold was here. I know it like I know I was. What do you expect to gain?"

"Somebody play 'Hearts and Flowers,'" Ira said.

He walked out, slamming the door behind him. Sherry smiled faintly, as if indulging a recalcitrant child.

"Have another drink, angel. There are depths of pathos you haven't even touched."

"Go away," Brad said moodily. "I want to make a telephone call."

"When you're human again, you can telephone me. I'll be at home."

She left, and Brad was desolately alone. He had two more drinks in quick succession. His thoughts were aslosh as he stared at his telephone.

Why don't you admit it?—he said savagely to himself. They didn't lie to you. You dreamed it. You dreamed the whole thing, giants and all. You dreamed everything but Clare Windsor. But what do you want with her when Sherry's around? She's no prettier, she's no smarter, she's no more desirable. So what do you do? You pick a fight with Sherry. All right, if you've got any manhood at all, you'll even it up. You'll pick a fight with Clare. Well, what are you waiting on? Diddle that dial.

After some fumbling for the right number, Brad had Clare on the other end, but before he could speak, his mysterious Call came out of nowhere, and the angel spoke to him.

"Your own fate is nothing, McClain. But the whole future of humanity depends on your unwavering faith."

As from a great distance, Brad heard Clare. "Hello. Hello, hello. Who is it? What do you want?"

The dark, thin face of the angel was expressionless, but the black eyes snapped. "If your doubts win over your belief, the Nephilim are lost. You are lost. You will destroy your heritage. Your son will never live. You will have killed him."

From the telephone, fainter than the sharp words of the angel: "Who is it? What number are you calling? Answer me!"

Brad's vision faded, and Clare's voice filled his mind. "What happen our date?" he demanded.

"Father told me not to see you," she said. "What's the matter? Why didn't you answer me?"

"You think more him, me?"

"What? I don't understand."

"Perfec' plain queshion. Go hell, m' pretty."

He hung up, stared dully at the telephone, then fumbled in his desk for the affidavits. When the letters stopped swirling, he noted the address of Mortimer Jerrold, scrawled it on a piece of copy paper, and stuffed it into his pocket.

He got to his feet, walked unsteadily to the door. He returned to take one last long swallow from the bottle. This scorched a path down his gullet and seemed to steady the floor, which had begun to tilt under him like the deck of a ship in a slow swell. He walked with deliberate dignity through the front office and carefully locked the door behind him, on the ringing telephone.

Behind the wheel of his car, he crawled in the right-hand lane, blinking his eyes at intervals in an attempt to keep the scene ahead in focus. He smiled vacuously at every traffic cop, and waited in wounded patience when red lights caught him at intersections.

"I'm unsober," he said aloud once.

He drove to a section of weatherboarded roominghouses, threading a careful path between children of all colors who whooped in the street. After a great deal of blinking at street numbers,

Somehow the old man got up from where the car had thrown him and started away—

he stopped before a house with sagging front steps and flaking paint.

He pushed the doorbell, pounded on the door, then straightened his tie and brushed his hair, guiding his hands by the reflection in the door glass. He squared his shoulders as he caught the images of a line of grinning children behind him at the bottom of the steps, and ignored them with rigid dignity until the door was opened by a large, gaunt woman in a spotted blue apron.

"How do?" Brad said carefully.

She said nothing, eyed him with disinterest, and waited.

"Looking for Mort'mer Jerrold, madam."

"He's dead."

Brad caught a shocked breath. "No! When?"

"Several months ago. Who're you?"

"My poor brother," Brad mourned. "Could I look his room, where breathe his last?"

"His room's rented. I'd starve, if I left one empty that long. He left some stuff, though. You can have it, if you want to pay the four seventy-five back rent he owed."

"Pleasure," Brad said. "Pleasure. Where stuff?"

"Come along."

He followed her through odors of fish along a thin-carpeted dark hallway. In a room which was packed with similar baggage, she pointed to a battered imitation-leather suitcase.

"That's his. Gimme the money."

Brad took a five-dollar bill from his wallet, hesitated. "Want be sure my brother, madam. Big guy, red hair?"

"Certainly not!" she said indignantly. "Say! What kind of shindy you trying to pull? You're not his brother."

"Just want be sure," Brad said soothingly. "Not red hair. Not much hair. Not many ear. Only one. He's nice man, little gray man. Huh?"

"All right," she said reluctantly. "Gimme. Take it."

"I got faith," Brad said. "I got plenty faith."

"Huh?"

"Wasn't talkin' you. Talkin' angel."

She took the bill from his limp fingers and backed away, the whites of her eyes shining in the gloomy baggage room. She said nothing, but waited while Brad picked up the suitcase and preceded her along the odorous hallway.

In his car with the suitcase on the seat beside him, Brad wanted to sing. Not that he was happy or hilarious. He simply felt like music. Song, or any other. Like Fiero, maybe. At Louie's.

He gave no thought to the portable estate of Mortimer Jerrold; he was not curious of its con-

tents. He shied away from the fact that Mortimer Jerrold had died several months before. He did not speculate on the identity of his caller, whom he had apparently mistaken as the drug addict. He didn't care any more. He wanted to go to Louie's and hear some music.

The place was deserted. Brad blinked at the empty booths, the empty bar stools that were like mushroom chorines.

"Hey! Louie!"

Louie came hurrying from the rear, rubbing sleep from his black eyes. "Mr. McClain, I am glad to see you, by golly. Joe Balaam is coming, also that Fiero."

"I wanta sleep for a couple minutes," Brad said.

"Sure, sure. I got a little room. You come with me."

"Wait minute. Got baggage in car."

"I will get," Louie said, and darted out. He returned with the suitcase and led Brad to a small room with a leather couch against one wall. "Can rest here, Mr. McClain. Anything you want, can get, by golly. You give a yell, or turn over the furniture."

Brad sat on the edge of the couch when Louie had gone, and opened the suitcase. Pictures, letters, knicknacks, a broken hypodermic, a large, heavy scroll.

He unrolled it, and not only the unknown language in which it was written but also the heavy parchment itself brought him a sensation of ancientness. His impressions were fuzzy around the edges, but the central impact came through.

Language unknown. Unknown to him, the plain, neat writing. But known, surely. To whom? A deep and psychic certainty that this document held significance overlaid his alcoholic vagueness.

He peered at it, tried to find a word he knew. After a long and earnest search, he rolled it again and laid it aside. He began an examination of the remaining papers. Perhaps a clue was here, a clue to the nature and contents of the scroll.

He found it, a thin sheaf of typed pages. "How I Found the Lost Testament of the Nephilim." He flipped through the pages to the signature, "Mortimer Jerrold."

Brad comprehended only dully, but underneath his fumbling thought was intense spiritual excitement. He jumped to his feet, took two long strides to the door.

"Louie!"

Louie appeared, with a pleasant dark visage.

"Got to sober up," Brad explained carefully. "Got to do some work. Gimme drink. Gonna drink m'self sober."

"Anything you want, Mr. McClain."

"Straight whiskey, soda chaser. Big."

Brad sat on the couch again and tried to focus on the typed pages. But the letters were liquid, flowing in twisting black lines. He clenched his eyes, rubbed them heavily, but they failed to focus.

"Need drink," he muttered. "Louie!"

Louie came, and Brad tossed off the drink. For a moment, he seemed to know a word here and there on the top page. Then he fell back on the couch and passed out.

VII.

Somebody had built a merry-go-round in his head, and somebody else had emptied dirty ash trays in his mouth. Still somebody else stuck pins into his eyeballs, from behind. He was sick. He was afraid—very much afraid that he was going to live.

Now and then he floated. He was a cloud, shot with lightning and the thunder of his pulse. He tried not to open his eyes, unsure of what he might see. He didn't want to see anything, ever.

Then he opened them, on thick, cool darkness. He became aware of a hand across his forehead, soft, soothing. "Who's that?"

"Nobody but us chickens," said Sherry's voice. "It was a toss-up whether we'd bury you or cut you up for flagstones. You were petrified. How do you feel, if any?"

Brad groaned.

"I guess you've really got a hangover," she said. "Or vice versa. Keep your eyes shut, and I'll bring you a Prairie Oyster, a glass of stale beer, and four aspirins. If that doesn't fix you, we'll dump you in a drain and go home."

He heard her heels click out of the room, and the soft whisper of silk. He lay somnolent in the darkness, a confusion of thought in his mind. He was not completely clear as to his whereabouts, but events came limping out of his memory, and presently he remembered the scroll and the sheaf of typed pages. He knew where he was; alone in the little room, with the effects of Mortimer Jerrold on the floor beside him.

Through the closed door came muted sounds of the bar beyond: clink of glassware, muffled laughter, the soft, patterned beat of boogie-woogie from the juke box. Another sound was in his ears, too; nearer, disturbing, insistent. A whisper. A repeated phrase.

"The theft is unimportant; the loss, nothing. The theft is unimprotant; the loss, nothing."

The whisper ceased, or was drowned by the swell of sound when Sherry opened the door again. "Keep your eyes shut. I'm going to turn on the lights."

A click, and soft radiance beat against his closed lids. Brad flung an arm across the upper part of his face.

"Who else is in here?" he asked.

"Nobody but you and me."

"I heard someone while you were gone."

"I could see the door all the time. Nobody came in or out. Maybe it was your prodigal conscience returning. Raise up, now, and swallow this like a little man."

She slipped an arm under his shoulders, lifted him to a sitting posture, and put a cocktail glass in his free hand. While he held the other over his eyes, he gulped the raw egg and Worcestershire sauce, then reached a curved hand for the beer.

"Aspirin first," Sherry said, and put tablets into his hand.

He tossed these into his mouth, accepted a tall glass, and took a long swallow of tasteless beer. He sat motionless for a full minute, began to feel better, and opened his eyes.

"I guess the crisis has passed. What happened?"

Sherry's smile was tender, her eyes a soft blue that matched her evening dress. "As Louie put it, you sleep like anything for a while, by golly."

"I feel like somebody slipped me a Micky." He focused on the slim blue length of her. "You look like what every beautiful blonde should wear."

"I have a date with Fiero. Will you join the party?"

"I need a party like a fish needs feathers. Wait a minute. Got something to—"

He halted as his glanced dropped to the suitcase. The scroll, with its strange language, was gone. Nothing else appeared to have been touched; the sheaf of Jerrold's manuscript was on the floor where it had fallen from his nerveless fingers, the knicknacks, the broken hypodermic were still in the suitcase.

"Somebody *did* slip me a Micky," he said.

Her expression took on a tinge of alarm. "What's the matter? You look like you lost your marbles."

Brad got off the couch, stood swaying on widespread feet. "Excuse me while I kick the hell out of Louie."

He walked unsteadily toward the door, but Sherry blocked him.

"Wait a minute. What gives, Brad?"

He looked down at her. "Louie gave me knockout drops and stole a thing from me."

"A thing?"

"Something that was very important to me."

"But maybe Louie had nothing to do with it. He didn't act suspicious when he told me you were in here."

"He gave me a blackout pill in my drink. I passed out almost instantly. Let me pass."

"No, Brad. Wait till you sober up."

"I'm sober enough."

He pushed her gently but firmly aside and went into the bar. Louie came from behind the counter, smiling.

"You feeling better, Mr. McClain?"

Brad cocked a fist. "Your story better be good, or I knock you through the wall."

The sprinkle of customers at the bar turned at the volume and tone of his voice. Joe Balaam sauntered near from a booth where he had been sitting with Fiero. Louie's dark eyes widened, became liquid with bewildered hurt.

"Where's that scroll?" Brad demanded.

"What you talking, Mr. McClain?"

"You gave me a Micky Finn and took a parchment scroll from the suitcase I brought in here. What did you do it for, and what did you do with it? Quick!"

"Honest, I don't give nobody a Micky. Honest, Mr. McClain."

"What's the trouble, Brad?" Joe Balaam asked at his elbow.

Brad explained. "And now," he concluded, "I want it back, or I tear out one side of the building with Louie."

"If he says he didn't give you a Micky, Brad, then he didn't. Louie doesn't lie."

"Somebody took that scroll, though," Brad said in a milder tone. "I was a little drunk when I got here, and I could have folded, I guess. I don't think so, but I could have. But, by damn, I want that scroll, and I want it now!"

"I didn't take nothing," Louie protested. "Nobody took nothing. You sleeping like sixty, I close up the door, and nobody goes in before your girl."

Brad swept the ring of spectators with an arrogant glance. He fixed on Sherry. "Did you take it?"

Her mouth dropped open; her eyes clouded. "Brad!"

"Sorry," he said. "You wouldn't. No. You wouldn't. Something goes on here. What is it?" He turned to Louie. "Nobody came in there?"

"Not nobody, Mr. McClain. You can see the door like anything from here. Anybody come in here got to come in by the front. The back door it don't open without the key."

"Someone could've come in while you weren't looking."

"But I'm looking all the time. I think maybe you wake up and want hair on the dog. So I'm looking."

"What kind of a scroll?" Joe Balaam asked.

Brad described it.

"Did you search the room thoroughly, Brad?"

"No."

"Let's do, then."

Fiero joined them, and together with Sherry they inspected every inch of the little room. Brad checked the window first, found it locked. They overturned the couch and examined its springs

bearded with dust, looked behind a portrait of Gabriel d'Annunzio on the wall, yanked the cushion from the big chair—and gave up.

"It's impossible," Brad said. "Louie is either lying or else somebody came in." He suddenly remembered the whisper, the repeated phrase: 'The theft is unimportant; the loss, nothing.' He turned to Sherry. "How long were you in here with me?"

"Half an hour."

"You sure we were alone?"

"Heavens, yes!"

A light film of goose flesh slipped up Brad's arms. "I heard a—" he began, but checked himself. "Never mind. Let it go. It's unimportant, nothing."

"What's this?" Fiero asked.

He had picked up Jerrold's manuscript, regarded it wide-eyed.

"I don't know," Brad said. "I had barely looked at it when I fell into a coma. Let's have a drink and find out."

When Brad, Sherry, and Joe Balaam had drinks to nurse, Fiero read aloud the Jerrold manuscript.

"In any land where customs are contrary to ours, and where the shapes of things are not our shapes, a familiar piece of architecture is more *outré* than even the weird native structures.

"Thus, the Jewish synagogue I found in the province of Honan, inland from the east coast of China, between the River of Sorrow and the Grand Canal, was an emotional shock.

"On the drought-cracked plain, surrounded by the dead fields of the famine-stricken village, it stood as it has through good times and ill for—who knows how many centuries? None could tell me there.

"Bit by bit I pieced its history together. A few of the peaceful natives could speak a variety of English, and so interpret the tales of the wrinkled elders. The history they gave me is garbled, perhaps, but the fact is there. A Jewish synagogue stands in Honan today, and not one of the natives knows aught of Judaism.

"Yet they will not eat pork, a fact incredible in this land where the preparation of pig meat reached the status of art so long ago the date is forgotten. They are Chinese, to all outward appearance, yet the natives of this village not only will not eat pork, but they observe the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, and practice circumcision.

"They don't know why. It is their custom. The Jewish culture which once must have existed here has left only these imprints. They have no Hebrew words. They are bland and yellow, not fiery and dark. They do not know the name of Jew.

"They were hungry, too, in the year of no rain when I was there. They were preparing to tear down a part of the synagogue and sell its bricks in Kaifeng for food.

"My stock of goods—oil, soap and other small luxuries—went begging for buyers, and I should have passed hurriedly through had it not been for the synagogue. A flavor of Arabia was in its lines. It was out of place. I wanted to know why, and when, and how, and whither.

"While they demolished a wall, I watched and listened to what was now remembered of the old tale. It came from a merry old Chinese, and a few of his withered cronies contributed a phrase at intervals. A young Chinese with scanty mission education interpreted while workmen loaded bricks on their backs and staggered off to a distant market.

"The temple, they said, was built by foreigners who came through the Khyber Pass across India and up into the Great Plain. An heroic journey, that.

"I gathered by inference—for historical facts no longer exist—that the colony of Jews was absorbed by the Chinese down through the years, as China has absorbed invaders for ages. In the inevitable clash of cultures, China always has the advantage. She has forever, and her reinforcements are countless. Thus the Jews were transmuted into Chinese by slow biological alchemy, and all that remains of their identity is the observance of three customs.

"During the telling of the tale, the parchment was found in a wall. It was old, but well preserved in careful wrappings, this scroll in ancient Hebrew. I did not know the language then, nor did the oldest scholars in the village.

"I wanted that scroll, and for them it had no practical value. I paid for it, and there was rice in the village that night.

"I packed the scroll among my stores and forgot it until I came back to Shanghai, several months later. Here I took it to a scholar for translation. I felt only a mild curiosity about it—as yet.

"I did not get the translation, for a stone fell on the old gentleman and killed him. I thought it coincidence, even though the stone fell in his locked study, where no stone could fall. There had not been a stone in the room, nor any other person.

"I suppose that falling stone is yet an unsolved puzzle in the archives. It caused a light mutter of suspicion in the International Settlement, and I experienced some difficulty in retrieving the scroll.

"That was the first. A series followed, in one place and another. By the time I had reached the United States again, three translators had died and a fourth had been blinded. The second had burned to death in a fireless room in which no other object was even scorched. The heart of the third had apparently stopped. The fourth was blinded, he said, by a blue-white brilliance which had the shape of a sphere.

"Coincidence? Not so. Not again and again. Yes, such events had transpired before, are matters of record. But did we know the circumstances? Without knowledge of factors, coincidence, yes. Accidents, yes. But not here, not here.

"By the time the fourth so-called accident had occurred, I began to regard that parchment with a mixture of superstition and fear. I felt that forces beyond my comprehension, though willing that I should retain nominal possession, were determined that I should not know its contents. And I was afraid. That fear rode me heavily, day and night.

"I acquired certain dissolute habits, for they gave me courage, courage enough to become my own translator. I had identified the language, and I began its study with a private tutor. I did extensive research in the public library, and when I had some knowledge of the symbols I tried my hand at translation.

"Oh, I was afraid. Even the white powder of courage which I purchased in small packages did not completely override my fear. But I was curious, too, and curiosity is stronger than fear.

"So many words, so many strange words. I have not progressed. But I wish to state what I have learned, so that someone may carry on if I should die tonight.

"The scroll is responsible, I am sure, for the term *Kishev*, forbidden. It is the original *Kishev*, the book of forbidden learning. Though ancient custom trans-

lated the term as applied to necromancy, black magic, and the worship of evil, I feel that it originally applied to this lost testament of the Nephilim.

"Why this is so I cannot say, for the Nephilim were produced by unions of humans and angels. Why should knowledge of them be forbidden?

"Did they write it? I don't know, but I shall. Probably they did not, for they perished in the Flood, and this parchment could not have survived that inundation.

"What I have learned in this day's study is meager. The Nephilim were giants, and they lived in a time of great violence. They were mighty men, renowned above others. They were physical and intellectual superiors of the baser flesh which was part of their heritage.

"But why should knowledge of this great race be buried in a temple wall? And why should some force, or thing, be interested enough to destroy translators?

"But perhaps I am mistaken. I am not dead. I have read some of the manuscript. Had the others, those who died? He who was blinded had not, I know. But had the others been allowed to know what was permissible and then killed? I shall know, perhaps. Perhaps.

"Signed this Christmas, 1941. Mortimer Jerrold."

VIII.

Mr. Boles knelt before the luminous pillar, a supplicant.

"Let the girl be destroyed, my captain! Let a place be prepared for her, as a place for the others was prepared. Let the Testament be destroyed! The adversaries will be ruthless, and they are gaining power.

"Will they be allowed to assume control? If so, we shall be tortured forever.

"My captain, I beg permission to act! I have the Testament. Let it be disintegrated, and its evil wiped forever away! For we know this: they hate us.

"Now, my captain! Let it be so!"

Mr. Boles waited, listening for words which did not come out of the pillar. Presently, the pillar began to fade, and the white head of Mr. Boles dropped lower.

"Very well, my captain. I obey the commands."

Ira Rafel faced his fellow angels.

"They do not suspect, my brothers. Vigilance! Secrecy is our watchword. We are helpless before the powerful tyranny of our opponents, but we have a great weapon in secrecy and in our ability to break through the Chains to McClain.

"Vigilance!

"The ignorance of our hateful masters is our seal of victory."

Brad closed his eyes in the silence that followed Fiero's reading, and tipped his head back against the chair. Sherry drew her slanted brows together in a frown. Joe Balaam stared at the floor. Fiero thumbed back through the few pages of the manuscript.

Cause and effect, Brad thought. I am the next-to-the-end result of angelic-human unions. An angel took a wife, and here am I. I take a wife, and our son lives forever. The picture is finished. Only the signature remains. Clare Windsor. Mother of an immortal. My wife.

Sherry broke into his thoughts. "Very interesting," she said. "But what of it?"

"Did you see Jerrold?" Fiero asked.

Brad looked at Sherry—the slim sheath of blue silk, the blue eyes, the heart face, the wine-gold hair—and felt knots in his stomach. He attempted to smile, but one corner of his mouth bogged down, and he turned to Fiero.

"Jerrold is dead."

Joe Balaam caught his breath. "I forgot to tell you, Brad. I asked the narcotic boys about him. He died Christmas night, asphyxiated in his room. They remembered him, because a window was open. There was plenty of fresh air."

"So they got him," Brad commented.

"Who got him?" Sherry demanded.

"Whoever—or whatever—didn't want the scroll translated."

"Nuts! Phooey! Nonsense."

Nobody said anything.

Sherry got to her feet. "Of all the drivel! You're a big boy now, dear. You can give up fairy tales. Why are you interested in all this, anyway?"

"I'm queer for little-known history."

"Falling stones!" Sherry scoffed. She stepped in front of Brad and looked down over a wide, amused smile. "Burnings without fires. Blindness from spheres. Honest to Pete, I think you're crazy."

Brad thought of his visions. "You don't know." he said. "You don't know."

"I know this, my bonnie boy. Whatever happened, there's an explanation for it."

"Then where's the scroll?"

"If there *was* a scroll."

"I saw it," Brad said grimly. "I brought it in here. If nobody was here but you, where is it?"

"I don't want to argue with you," Sherry said. "I don't know where it is. But you can bet it's some place, and it got there naturally."

"Let it go," Brad said. "I've got things to do." He got to his feet, started for the door.

"Listen," Fiero said. "How did you get hold of this, if he's been dead several months?"

"He called on me this—" Brad broke off, open-mouthed. "Who *did* come in this morning? He said he was Mortimer Jerrold, and answered the description I had of him. Furthermore, he knew I was looking for him. He talked like Fiero said he talked. Who was he?"

"Nobody came in," Sherry said in level tones.

"If anyone did," Fiero said, "it must have been Jerrold. Gray man? That's the way he impressed me. Gray."

"That's the guy. Then he isn't dead."

"But he is," Joe Balaam contradicted. "I made sure of it, since you were so interested."

"Then how did he come in to see me?" Brad pushed out flared hands. "Now don't tell me! I wouldn't believe it."

Joe Balaam stood, trim and dark in his uniform. "It wasn't Jerrold, Brad."

"Who, then?"

"I don't know, Brad. I'm not sure that I want to know."

"It had to be Jerrold," Brad insisted. "He knew who I was, knew I was looking for him. Who else could?"

Sherry flung up her hands abruptly. "The unimportance of this discussion is almost incredible. I want a drink."

"It's important to me," Brad snapped. "Who, Joe?"

"Maybe you didn't know this," Balaam said, "but I'm a Gypsy. The origins of our race are fairly obscure, but we do know that we differ. We are in touch with—ah, with something. With—um—someone, maybe. I can forecast the future to some extent, and my talents are trifling compared with some of my relatives. How? This manuscript offers a possible explanation."

Brad thought of a phrase from one of his visions —*the Nephilim shall come into their own.*

"Yes," he said.

"I don't get it," Sherry drawled. "And I don't care. I want some beer."

"The point I'm making," Joe Balaam went on, "is not that Nephilim might exist today. I don't suppose they do. But if angels could mate with human beings then, I see no reason why they couldn't now. But suppose they can't, for one reason or another. That still leaves a more credible possibility. They can assume human form."

"Now I've heard everything," Sherry murmured.

"Well," Brad said dubiously, "it's guesswork, at least."

"But it forms a pattern," Balaam continued. "How many times have you seen individuals perform some act or make some statement completely contrary to his established habit pattern? Many times, and you know it. Human nature is inclined to move in comfortable channels. It is not inclined to contradict itself by act or thought. Then, how do you know whether the individual who apparently contradicts himself is the same individual who made the contradicted act or statement?"

"I still believe the evidence gathered through my five major senses," Brad said.

"How do you know," Balaam persisted, "that I am who I seem to be? How do you know Sherry is?"

"I can see, can't I?"

"Can you? Can we? I wonder. Certainly an angel, if he had the power to impersonate, could provide sensual proof that the impersonation was the real thing."

"If I'm an angel," Sherry said, "where's my harp? And how did I get this dress that I went without lunches to buy? And if I'm an angel here, where am *I?* Some place else? I'd know about it."

"I didn't infer that you are an angel," Joe Balaam said. "I simply pointed out that *we* can't prove that you're not. Many court records will tell of the same person being in two different places at the same time. Well, which was real? We can't prove that you're not an angel, nor can Brad prove that an angel did not call on him in the guise of Mortimer Jerrold."

"Now that we've settled that," Sherry said, "let's drink some beer."

"We haven't settled anything," Brad said. "I'm curious about a couple of things. That mysterious series of deaths, and then the death of Jerrold—if he died. Why aren't we dead? We know as much as he did."

"They were killed," Joe Balaam asserted, "so that they could not learn more of the contents of the scroll. We can't learn more, because we don't have it."

"Listen!" Sherry exclaimed. "You say Jerrold was killed on Christmas. And you've made a lot of loud talk about supernatural forces killing him. Why, you stupes, even a six-year-old knows that devils and demons and what-nots aren't allowed to walk the earth on Christmas. Yet he died then. Well, who done it?"

"I don't know," Balaam said. "I don't want to know."

Brad took the manuscript from Fiero, went into the bar and searched with dully excited eyes for the telephone booth. He ignored Louie's placating smile, closeted himself in the lighted cubicle and rang Clare's number.

"First of all," he said, "I want to apologize. But you didn't show up, I had a little trouble with that lug who told me to keep away from you, and I got drunk. I'm sorry for whatever I said, and I don't remember what it was."

"It's . . . it's not important," she said in a half-choked voice.

Brad suppressed comment on the vocal indications that she had been crying. "Listen, Miss Windsor, listen to me. This is important. You say your father forbade you to see me. I know some of his reasons. But believe me, my reasons for needing to see you are so much more important than his opposition that it doesn't exist in the considerations. I must see you. Immediately."

"But I can't!" she wailed. "I want to, but we're catching a train in twenty minutes."

"Where? Union Station?"

"Yes, but . . . what are you thinking of doing?"

"Listen," Brad said tensely. "Listen. I'll park near the cab rank. You wander past, I'll open the door, and we'll take off. What I have to tell you is much more vital than your catching a train."

"I can't do that, Mr. McClain."

"You've got to. The whole future depends on it."

"Wh-what?"

"Sure, it sounds corny. But I know what I'm saying, and I'm right."

"But I don't understand."

"Nor I. But you can know without knowing why."

"But can't you give me any reason?"

"This. You're the most important girl in the world, not only to me but also to the world."

"Are you still drunk, Mr McClain?"

"On the contrary. I've got a hangover. My mouth tastes like a bag of old laundry. I don't *want* to do anything, but I've got to do this."

"I'll meet you, but you'll have to get me on the train."

"You won't want to—" Brad checked himself. Why argue with her?—he asked himself. "All right. I promise."

Brad pushed his car at top speed along the empty road, glad that it was in good condition. He could keep the date with five minutes to spare. As he sped between lighted bungalows, through the industrial district, he attempted to analyze his certainty that the visions were true. But his reasoning fell into a wallow of muddy thought. He had only the certainty, but no logic.

He was delayed at three intersections by the shimmy in his front wheels, which took his thoughts from analysis and directed a stream of low-voiced oaths at the car. When he arrived at the sprawling white station, Clare, Homer Windsor, and Philip Douglas were emerging from a cab at the entrance.

Brad swerved in to the curb, beeped his horn, and Clare hurried toward him, followed by her father's questions. Brad opened the door, she slipped inside, and he hurled his coupé through traffic, fighting the shivering wheels till increasing speed brought it under control. He kept an eye on the mirror, but found no signs of pursuit.

Clare huddled in the far corner of the seat, eyes overwide and dark in pale face intermittently washed by the headlights of oncoming automobiles. She said nothing, but fixed her glance on Brad. One Easter-lily hand she pressed against her shoulder; with the other she rubbed her tucked-under ankle with a spasmodic, nervous motion.

Still in silence, they thrust through traffic to the city's boundaries and hit the seething Federal highway which led to the State line. Brad slipped into the right lane, where traffic hummed at fifty, and relaxed.

"I suppose you'd like to know what this is about?"

"Heavens, wouldn't you?" she asked in thin tones.

"If I'd been you, I wouldn't have come. Why did you?"

"Well, I—" She hesitated, then said shyly: "I don't want to say."

"Good! Now listen to me, and don't interrupt until I've finished."

He told her how the visions started when he was young, how they hinted at, speculated upon, then forecast his destiny. He told her of the angel with the thin, dark face. He told her of the beautiful giant's: "Hello, son." He told her of the Nephilim, and the manuscript of Mortimer Jerrold. He spoke of the future ruler of the earth, his son—and hers. She did not interrupt the telling.

He told her of the mysterious Call which presaged the appearance of the angel, and how he had fought it until he learned that he housed the seeds of immortality for his son.

"So there it is," he said.

"But it's only a story," she protested.

"Is it? I can show you something concrete. We'll stop at that filling station. While I'm getting gas you can look at it."

He gave her Jerrold's manuscript, and she had finished by the time the enthusiastic attendant had done everything to the car but wash and polish it. When they were on the road again in thinned traffic, Brad spoke first.

"And he died on Christmas night, maybe instantly after he finished that."

"But what has this scroll to do with you?"

"With us," he corrected.

"Well, what has it?"

"I don't know. Apparently it's a lost—and forbidden—record. I don't know what's in it, may never know."

"You're still just guessing," she objected. "You don't *know*."

"The hell I don't. Listen. I'm told I'm the man of destiny, that my son will be immortal. That doesn't mean much. I simply think I'm crazy. Then I heard the word "Nephilim," who, through me, will come into their own. Then I'm told I shall find the only possible mate. Next, an infallible seer tells me I'll meet the girl tomorrow whom I'll marry. She turns out to be you. Now, up to there it's a fairy tale. But I ran across evidence that maybe some of the Nephilim escaped the Flood, and tonight I learn about the Nephilim themselves. That adds up to fact. Besides"—he placed a hand on his heart—"I feel it here."

She was quiet for a long while. Then, "Are you suggesting marriage—or what?"

"All right, if you insist. We'll say I've been dead six months."

"I'll tell you exactly how I feel about it," Brad said. "You hear sophisticates—so-called—say, 'Why get married? It's decadent.' Well, that's an easy pose to maintain while you're young and unattached, and as long as you don't get into difficulties. But our social life is cast into a certain form by the social matrix of our time, and any permanent relationship between sexes is impossible without a certain amount of embarrassment and ostracism. Yes, I'm suggesting marriage for practical reasons. Oh, the romance is there. You stir me. But I'm not sure I'm in love with you. Maybe yes, maybe no."

They slid down the highway split by a curving white line, progressively less burdened with automobiles. Clare had relaxed; both feet were on the floor, hands loosely clasped on her green skirt, head back against the cushion, eyes closed. Brad gave his attention to the road, and held the speed at sixty.

Presently, she spoke, more to herself than to Brad. "Mother of an immortal. Me. When I was a little girl, I knew something would happen to me. I knew I was better—" She hesitated, shrugged. "I might as well say it. I guess everyone feels that he's just a little better than all the rest. Only we don't talk about it. We don't tell it to anybody. But it's all right to say it to you, isn't it? You feel the same way?"

"It's all right," Brad said. "I feel the same. Only the hybrids do, I guess. Just ordinary people don't think about it, if I interpreted the angel rightly. He said that you would feel the same things I have all my life, the fears, the nameless yearning. Well?"

"I . . . I guess I must marry you, mustn't I? I can't help myself."

"Yes."

"On top of that, Mr. McClain, I think I'm falling in love with you. What is your first name, anyway? Seems kind of silly calling you Mr. McClain. My name will sound good, won't it? Clare McClain. Probably take me quite a while to get used to it."

"We'll duck across the State line, then," Brad said, "and get married. And thank you."

"I don't know whether I'm pleased or only excited. But I feel wonderful."

"What will your father say—or do you care?"

"He'll say plenty, but I guess I don't care very much. Do you?"

"No, but I don't want to take any chances. Can you drive?"

"Yes."

Brad pulled off the road and came to a long, slow stop. "We're near the State line. You drive across and up to the agricultural inspection station. Then, if anything should go wrong, I won't have violated the Mann Act."

She looked shyly at him. "Shouldn't a . . . a bride-to-be get kissed once?"

Brad took care of the matter, and she slid under the wheel. They crossed into the next State, and presently lights of the inspection unit came in sight. Clare glided to a stop behind a waiting line which moved forward slowly. In their turn, they halted while an inspector went over the car. He gave them a suspicious look when he was finished.

"Where you going?"

"To get married," Brad said.

"With no baggage at all?"

"We eloped on the fly."

The inspector's tanned face relaxed in a broad smile. "Good luck, kids." He waved them on.

Brad changed places with Clare, started the motor, and had eased it into gear when another inspector yelled from the office.

"Hey! Are you Brad McClain?"

Brad felt a stab of premonition which plunged the accelerator to the floor. The motor roared. Tires slipped, screamed, caught. The car lurched forward. The front wheels shimmied. Brad lost momentary control as a man stepped out of the shadows beyond the inspection shed into his path. A thud, a shock throughout the frame, a bump as the wheels passed over a body, and Brad fought the car to a stop.

Voices cried, feet pounded. An inspector appeared, he who had yelled at Brad.

"You Brad McClain? Come out of there. You're under arrest. Got orders to hold you."

Brad jumped out. "The hell with that! I've just run over some fool who jumped in front of me. See about him first."

The inspector's jaw dropped, and he followed Brad around the car.

A man was moving from under the car. An old man in blue jeans, with white hair and a round face. Brad caught his breath.

"Mr. Boles! What are you doing here? Are you hurt?"

Mr. Boles got to his feet, brushed at his clothes.

"Hurt? Of course not."

IX.

Brad sat on the edge of his cot, elbows on knees, moody chin on the heel of a hand. From either side along the block of cells came the mutters, the snores, the tossings, the twistings of prisoners. Dim bulbs striped each cell with shadows, and bar stripes slanted across sleeping men and across Brad McClain, morose on the edge of his cot.

Why don't I face it?—he asked himself bitterly. It's a fairy story. It's wishful dreaming. If it had any basis, we'd have gone through with it. Nothing would have stopped us. But no. Everything piled up on us, and Clare went to pieces. Sherry is right—I want some beer.

Sherry. She wouldn't have cried. She wouldn't have yelled for papa. She wouldn't have accused me of abduction.

And Mr. Boles. How did he get away so quickly? One minute he was there; the next—he *had* been there.

No, the hell with it, disappearing scrolls, visions, Nephilim, Clare, and the future. Let the future people itself. Immortals everywhere, if it likes. But not mine, not mine. Why should I do anything for the future? What has it ever done for me?

He lay back on his cot, closed his eyes, and speculated on the chances of his conviction. Assault and battery. Charges preferred by Philip Douglas.

He ceased to speculate, ceased to think, as the Call filtered through to his consciousness. He relaxed without struggle, to listen one last time.

The vision took form—dark pointed face of the angel.

"McClain!" he said. "You are losing faith. Will you cast aside man's chance to life? Will you deny the Nephilim their right?

"Heed, McClain! Know this: on you alone do we depend. Armageddon will surely come, without your aid, and in the day of Armageddon the Nephilim will die. The whole temporal system will collapse, and destruction will cover the earth. Nations will perish; kings will bleed in the streets. Blood will cover the cities; babies will cry in the nights.

"That is Armageddon. Will you let millions die, nay, billions? Yours is the power to prevent it. Your son will be immortal. Any immortal, in time, can enslave, if need be, all mortal men. For mortals die, and the power of the immortal increases with each generation.

"Through him will the angels govern. Man will be raised from economic and social degradation. There will be no need for the wholesale destruction of Armageddon.

"Think on your opportunity, McClain! You alone are blessed above all others with the seed of eternal life. None other has possessed; none might ever again. It is not too late, but time presses. Hesitate, and man is lost.

"Listen, McClain! Listen with your heart and head, and with your blood, for it is the blood of life. All others carry the blood of death.

"The old prophecies are true, and they tell of nations, peoples, and a whole civilization wiped off the earth. Wars and rumors of wars, the final collapse of things as they are. A few will survive, without your intervention. But none need die if you keep faith.

"The old and the mighty were your ancestors. They had a touch of deathlessness, but only a touch. Nature has fashioned you to propagate eternal man, if you choose and take your mate.

"Mistake her not, McClain!

"That angels may raise man to his rightful level, an immortal man must take their advice, their learning, their wisdom. Through them he may translate, administrate the Testament. In it is truth, and only in it. All others are false. Remember this. In falsity lies death—death to nations. And the cities will fall into dust.

"Armageddon must never come. It shall not. Mankind shall prevent it, and he shall be led by—a man. That man must be immortal, wise with more than the wisdom only for dying, which one life span gives. The angels will give him kindness, and mercy, and ability.

"Hearken, McClain! Devastation such as man has never known will come at Armageddon. Kingdoms will dissolve, and they shall not bury their dead. Ruin will sweep the seas, drought will wither the fields, and famine lay children at the roadside. The waters will be filled with poison. Death will fall from the sky. Men will scramble and die—for a handful of grain. Fire will gut the palaces of the rich, and wreathe the hovels of the poor.

"Yes, and the mighty shall mingle with the weak—in dust. Old and young alike shall bury their weeping faces in the earth, and none shall make them glad.

"But there is a way, McClain.

"You, McClain, and you alone may prevent this. Not all the rulers, nor all the machines of life or of death may stay the final ravage of violence. Only you may save, you and your mate.

"Keep faith! You have true knowledge now. Use it, that man may live; lose faith, and he shall surely die."

Brad did not open his eyes when the vision faded, but he lay awake in the half-light, and felt an inner drive take form in that indefinable part of man which pushes him onward day to day. If any of the Nephilim had escaped the Deluge, he concluded, then he was the man of destiny, father of the future deathless ruler of the earth. Had any lived through forty days and nights of rainfall?

Footsteps in Arizona. The only evidence?

No. Paul Bunyan, John Henry, the Brobdingnagia, Antaeus, Goliath, Gog, Magog, Gargantua, the Cyclops, the Catlums. And others. Fiction? Many believed in one or another on the list. That belief came down, generation after generation, to the present. Were the roots of that belief anchored in forgotten fact, in ancient truth?

Surely man cannot create outside himself, or outside racial memory. All he knows is inside, or what his fathers have known. All he knows is carried to his brain by one or another of his senses, then stored in his memory.

True, once a man has heard of giants, he can write or tell of others. But can he tell or write with conviction if knowledge of the existence of giants is not buried somewhere in his consciousness? Man, Brad believed, remembers instinctively the first primitive struggle for existence, the first hewing of the wilderness. Remembers, too, that giants walked the earth.

Else why the legends?

That memory of giants, Brad thought, accounts for our striving to keep up with the Joneses. It could, anyway, be an explanation of mankind's general struggle to surpass, to excel. If. Yes, if. If giants walked the earth.

Then, mortals must have lifted eyes filled with hatred to the beautiful beings who towered. They must have strutted, preened and shouted their fitness—in this birth of the inferiority complex.

If. If his visions came from outside, from an angel. If so, then Brad McClain was the sport, the atavism. A billion-chanced combination of genes and chromosomes had made him the fountainhead of immortality. Half a fountain, rather. Clare Windsor was the complement.

Once more, Brad believed; and once more his resolve took form. He must mate with Clare, must marry her—temporarily, at least.

When he lifted his hand to the office doorknob the next afternoon, Brad halted midway in the gesture.

This was a hard thing, a hard thing to do. Sherry hadn't asked any questions. She had brought the bail money, cleaned out the bank account, had heard the story of his capture with Clare, and hadn't asked any questions.

He opened the door, and she eyed him from her desk.

"Wonderful what a bath and shave will do for a convict," she said. To the empty air, she said, "O. K., boys. You can stop fattening the calf. He's here."

"Any mail?" Brad asked.

"No, but your girl friend has been calling every five minutes." As the telephone chittered at her elbow, she said, "She's gonna wear this bell out. Are you in to the lady?"

"No. I want to think."

Sherry picked up the telephone, said into it, "A watched pot never boils. Mr. McClain is still out. I'll have him call you." She hung up and followed Brad into his office.

Brad sat quite still at his desk and looked at Sherry, contrasting her with a picture in his mind, the picture of Clare when he was arrested. Where Clare had been a little hysterical, Sherry was now calm, her wide mouth canted with a tender amusement. Clare's hands had been knotted at her throat; Sherry's hung loose against her blue flannel skirt. Clare's hair had seemed to stand on end; Sherry's lay in careless but orderly blond swirls.

This was a hard thing.

"You haven't asked for advice," Sherry said, "but that never stopped me. Scram."

Brad squinted. "Hm-m-m?"

"Scram."

"Where? Why?"

"Anywhere. Why? Because you're being framed, that's why."

Brad thought it over. "Ye-es, I suppose. But I can't jump bail. That's my money. All I've got."

"And fifty bucks besides, which I tossed in. I never heard of bail being so high for the charge. You'd think you were charged with mayhem, arson, kidnaping, procuring, murder and treason. Instead of giving a thug a slug in the mug."

"That's Windsor's doing, I shouldn't be surprised."

"And what comes next?" Sherry said. "This, my pretty. Conviction. Maybe assault with a deadly weapon. Maybe with intention to kill. Rock Pile Rollo, you'll be known as."

"The fact that I'm innocent cuts no ice, of course."

Sherry snorted. "Not a single cube."

Brad twisted his mouth. His wide-set eyes were darkly ironical. "This is wonderful, this is. St. George and the dragon, that's me. I've been shooting at the political system ever since I started this paper, and now it's about to swallow me. The amusing thing is that the fact that I've been shooting at it is beside the point."

Sherry said quietly, "Is there a point?"

"Yes. The new development, quite aside from my views on politics and political bosses, is far more important. You see, I'm a—"

Brad broke off in confusion. Telling it to Sherry was silly. Oh, she would listen, all right. She'd wait until he was finished. She'd smile indulgently. She'd say, "Yes, dear." She'd wonder how soon she could make an appointment for him with a psychiatrist. But regardless of what proof he could offer, she'd never believe.

Who would? Clare hadn't actually, it seemed, and Clare had wanted to believe.

"Yes?" Sherry prompted. "You're a—what?"

"A dope, I guess. Let it go." Brad looked at Sherry for a long time. Then, "I got something to tell you."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I'm going to be married."

Sherry gave a short laugh. "In the prison chapel?"

"If I leave town, the case will be dropped. I can take her with me."

"Clare Windsor?"

"Yes."

Sherry knitted her fingers together, loosely. "What do you want me to say?"

"Nothing, I guess. I just wanted to tell you. I . . . I'm sorry, Sherry."

"For Heaven sakes!" She stared at him. "Why?"

"Because, if you'd have had me, it would have been more fun. But I can't ask you."

Sherry sat in the chair and lit a cigarette. "This question is purely academic. Why can't you ask me?"

"Because I've got to marry Clare."

Sherry was quiet for a few seconds. Then she said:

"Oh."

"It isn't what you think," Brad said hurriedly. "I have a legitimate and very important reason."

"I'm sure you have," Sherry murmured.

"Well, damn it, I have!"

"All right! So you have. So you're going to jump your bail and be married. That's an end to it. What do you want me to do? Cheer? Lead us in prayer?"

Ira Rafel came in.

The telephone rang.

Sherry reached for the phone, nodded to Ira, and questioned Brad with her eyebrows.

"Yes," he said. "I'm in."

She answered, handed it to Brad with a significant nod.

"This is McClain," he said.

"This is Clare Windsor," her fervent voice said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thanks to my secretary."

"I'm sorry, Mr. McClain," she said. "I was nervous and upset. I didn't mean those things I said. I suppose it's all off, now?"

"On the contrary."

"Oh, I'm so glad! When can I see you?"

"Wait a minute. Let me figure." Brad thought for a moment. "Have you any money?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Good. Can you be ready to leave town by day after tomorrow?"

"Where are we going?"

"Away. I can't stay here and let your father toss me in the can."

"Whatever do you mean?" Her voice was puzzled, defensive.

"What I say. Your old man is framing me."

"But I don't understand. He's very pleasant today. He thought it was funny, running off to get married, and getting arrested for a traffic ticket. He told me he liked you."

"So? Listen, Clare. Get away from there. Get out of the house. Go to a hotel. Don't tell anybody. You can call me here and let me know where you are. But do it quick."

"But—"

"Don't argue!" Brad snapped. "Either we're going through with this or not. Make it easy on yourself."

"I want to, but—"

"Then don't ask a lot of damned fool questions. I know what I'm doing."

"All right," she said softly. "Command me. I am yours, my lord."

Brad blinked at the phone. It was no gag. She was serious. She meant it. My lord.

"Ulp!" he said. "Well, I've told you. Let me know where you are, and I'll try to get over to see you. Then, as soon as I've cleaned up my business, we'll scram."

He hung up and looked at the phone like a man who has just had a magic trick played on him. Ira Rafel spoke to him twice before Brad raised his eyes.

"Pardon? Did you say something?"

"Are you going somewhere?" Ira repeated.

"Yes," Brad said abstractedly. "Yes."

"As it must to all men," Sherry said, "love came to McClain."

"Is that the way you talk when you're in love?" Ira asked. He imitated Brad: "'Then don't ask a lot of damned fool questions.' Is that the way?"

"I wondered about that, too," Sherry commented.

"Why don't you people go away!" Brad snapped. "I've got work to do."

Ira's face had no expression. "You're not serious? You're not going away? You're under arrest."

"That's why," Brad said.

"But you've got to appear. I understand it's the law."

"I'm not very good at lock stepping. I don't want to learn."

"But you're innocent! They can't put you in jail."

"Can't they? Will you bring me magazines? What's the matter with you, Rafel? You dug up the story on Windsor. It was your idea that he was the hidden big boss. Now he's had me arrested, and you spout innocence and guilt. What's that got to do with it?"

"Maybe if you'd explain why you're running away," Ira said mildly, but curiously, "maybe I'd know what you're talking about."

"Lesson number uno," Sherry said. "Listen, stupe. This hatchet man comes in and drops a rod on Brad. Sure, he made the play, and Brad's really in the clear. But ye gods, who do you think runs this town, the voters? There'll be ten men, brave and true, who'll swear on the witness stand that they saw Brad batter this cuss in the puss. So he'll go up the river."

"This is what you call law and order?" Ira asked.

"In a field of blue," Sherry said.

"But I was here," Ira objected. "I can testify in your behalf."

"And be pinched for perjury," Brad said. "Or worse. Look, it's happened lots of times. Suppose half a dozen witnesses testify that you and I attacked this Phil Douglas and just beat him with a gun. They all have the same story, and they all say we tried to kill him. What does that make us?"

"Close-shaven on the skulls," Sherry said.

"But it isn't fair, it isn't just!"

Brad's jaw dropped in astonishment. "What's that got to do with it?"

"Do you believe in Santa Claus, too?" Sherry asked. "It's really your Uncle Elmer, you know."

"Then something should be done about such conditions," Ira said grimly.

"Start your own damned crusades," Brad growled. "I haven't got time. I've got to catch a train."

"Well, don't do anything rash for a while," Ira said, and went out.

Sherry stared after him. When he had pulled the door shut behind him, she said, "He's been reading schoolbooks."

Brad began sorting the contents of his desk. "I'll send your fifty bucks to you, Sherry."

"Yes, do." At the sound of the opening door, she turned. "Cheese it, the cops!"

Joe Balaam smiled, nodded at Brad. "You're not going to stay and face it?"

"Would you?" Brad countered.

"Ordinarily, no!" Balaam said. "It's obvious that Windsor wants you out of the way for one reason or another, but nothing will happen to you."

Sherry blinked. "What have we here? Reach down in that crystal ball, swami, and haul out his prison number."

"He isn't going to prison."

"They're not playing games," Brad said. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have been hauled back from—" He broke off, slitted his dark eyes. "Say! How did anybody know where to find me?"

"I did that, Brad," Joe Balaam said. "I turned you in."

Brad stared. "Gee, thanks!"

X.

Mr. Boles trembled a little. He did not face the light directly. He lowered his eyes so that they focused at the foot and somewhat to one side of the luminous pillar.

"I do what I'm told," he said stoutly. "I never question. That is well known. But I have a complaint. I have lost dignity, and I believe we are harmed by the loss. My efficiency has been impaired.

"I am in constant touch with human affairs, and I know.

"I was told that McClain should not be in-

fluenced in his belief, that he should be allowed to know the truth.

"I did not question the order.

"Then I was told to give him the whole truth, to elaborate the fragment he knew. I tried. You know I tried. But he refused to listen, as is his privilege. Then I was told to leave him alone.

"I did not question. I did not understand these commands and contradictions, but I did not question.

"Then I was told to permit his marriage to the dark girl. Almost immediately, I was commanded to prevent it.

"Here is my complaint. Even I need time. Our adversaries have planned carefully, and do not move hurriedly. Such actions as I was forced to take raise questions, and since we are not allowed to take direct action, such questions react against us.

"I do what I'm told. If I am told to throw myself into fire, or from a building, I shall not question. But I have a right to demand co-operation. I have the right to know my orders far enough ahead of the event that I can act with dignified indirection. I petition for more time."

Mr. Boles waited. No reply came. The luminous pillar did not move.

"Very well," Mr. Boles continued. "If my request is not to be granted, I'll do the best I can.

"Here is my report on the testament of the Nephilim. I have done what I can, but I have failed, I am afraid, to accomplish enough.

"I cannot communicate with the man, Fiero. True, he is not a hybrid. He is a human, completely. But he translates all messages into music. He is incapable of translating them into thought or action. It is my opinion that another should be selected. It is my opinion that Fiero is unsuitable.

"As you know, the manuscript is in his room. He has not found it yet, and it is doubtful, in my mind, whether or not he will perform his function when he does. Must he die, too, as the others died? I shall await your order.

"I am confused, my captain, but I obey. No member of the Hosts has a better record for obedience than I. My request for more information, and for more time, is in the interest of the Plan. I can better serve when I am better informed.

"How long must I act in darkness?"

Mr. Boles peered at the pillar of light for the first time, trying to penetrate its luminous wall.

"I came up to explain, Brad," Joe Balaam said. "I felt a helpless shame. Helpless because I had to do what I did. Shame because I took an unfair advantage."

"Break it down into English," Brad said shortly.

Joe Balaam took a few strides around the office. Then he faced Brad across the desk.

"I knew nothing about your elopement, Brad. I knew nothing about your beef with Phil Douglas. But all of a sudden I had one of my flashes of foreknowledge, and felt a compulsion to act."

"Maybe," Sherry murmured, "you could tell me what I did with my new purse the other night."

"I called headquarters," Balaam continued, "and asked if they were looking for you. My lieutenant fairly jumped up and down. He didn't say that the order to pick you up came from Windsor, but I gathered that it did."

"So you made a little political capital," Brad sneered. "Did you get your picture in the paper? Maybe the big shot will promote you to a job hawking hashish. Step right up, boys. Get your hop from the intuitive cop. You're going to a lot of trouble to explain why you ratted on me, Joe. I thought we were friends."

"We were," the cop said earnestly. "We are. I simply couldn't help myself. It's hard for me to tell you, Brad. When I get one of my—well, call them hunches, I must do what I feel. It's like an order from . . . from . . . I don't know. At any rate, the order is stronger than I. I must obey."

Brad thought of his own compulsion when the Call came into his consciousness. It could be fought, but not for long. Eventually the dark angel appeared. Brad looked at Joe Balaam with a vague sympathy.

"Sorry I snapped at you, Joe. I know you don't wish me any harm. Well, all I have to do is grab a train and get away. Windsor wants me out of town. That's all, I'm pretty sure. I bet it makes no difference to him whether I'm in prison or Oshkosh. He doesn't want me to break up his racket, which maybe I could."

"That's twice you've mentioned his racket," Joe Balaam said. "What do you mean?"

"Let it ride," Brad said. "Why should you get fired or killed for knowing too much about something you can't change?"

"Well, a cop is pretty helpless," Balaam agreed.

"If I may interject a note," Sherry said. "You dropped a few words about Brad not going to jail. Drop some more. Maybe I can get my fifty bucks right away."

Joe Balaam was at ease, now that the tension had gone out of Brad. He hung his usually friendly smile on his dark face and let his fingers relax.

"When I was coming up in the elevator, I had another flash. Brad won't be convicted."

"It's a pretty dream," Brad said, "but it doesn't fit the local conditions very well. If Windsor really has it in for me, the best thing I can do is beat it."

"With his daughter?" Sherry asked. "He'll for-

give everything then?"

"That has nothing to do with this situation," Brad snapped.

"My! You're feeling deeply today."

Joe Balaam averted his eyes while Brad and Sherry glared at each other for a few seconds. Presently they flushed and half smiled. Balaam flicked a glance at Sherry, then faced Brad again.

"Ordinarily," he said, "I'd agree with you. But I wish you wouldn't go before the preliminary hearing. It's day after tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Yes. Look, Joe, I've seen a flock of your hunches pay off. I've converted a few into liquor, as you know. But I can't take a chance on this. They never concerned me very much before, and I was willing to gamble as long as they couldn't cost me anything but money. But honest to Pete, I don't look well in a ball and chain."

"You can't lose anything by attending the preliminary hearing."

"Except part of a day I was going to use to leave."

"And get married," Sherry said.

"*And* get married," Brad echoed.

Brad looked at Balaam, remembering the night he had said that Brad would never marry Sherry.

Balaam chose to ignore the significant glance. "On the other hand," he said, "you'll make your plea and a trial date will be set. You'll have at least a couple of weeks to make a getaway if it looks necessary."

"O. K., Joe. I'll chance it."

When Balaam had gone, and Sherry had moved into her own office, Brad continued to sort the papers, memoranda, unsolicited articles on how to make the world safe for this and that, cartoons which stressed poor drawing and impassioned rhetoric, a socially-conscious novel written in pencil by someone whose name and address was illegible, unpaid bills, old typewriter ribbons and all the conglomera which had accumulated in his desk during the past six months.

He dumped most of this in his wastebasket, replaced the remainder and stared helplessly at the filing cases.

Then he shrugged. Why worry?—he asked himself. I'm making a clean break. Sherry and Ira can take care of the paper if they like. I won't be back. I've only one purpose, to produce a son.

His telephone rang. Clare. A slightly hysterical Clare.

"I can't leave the house," she wailed. "I'm locked in."

"They can't do that," Brad said. "You're a big girl now."

"But I'm guarded. Daddy told Phil Douglas to keep me inside."

"You're of age," Brad pointed out. "Call the police." He gave a short laugh. "That would be silly. Your old man owns the police force. Damn! Let me think. Look, I'll call you back."

He hung up, sat staring at the wall for a few minutes. Then he got the affidavits of Homer Windsor's narcotic activities and the letter signed "Dulcy," and leafed through them.

If he could get legal evidence, with witnesses, of the truth as set forth in these documents, he could make Homer Windsor a trade—the papers for his daughter. But, he reflected, that would take time, and expose him to a trial he did not propose to stand.

However, he must have Clare. It would be better to do a stretch up the river and return to her than to skip town and lose her forever.

Evidence. How to go about it? Certainly Windsor had used every possible means to protect himself. Not a whisper of illegal activities had ever been connected with Homer Windsor except for these affidavits signed by Mortimer Jerrold.

And Mortimer Jerrold was dead. But was he?

In the press of events, Brad had forgotten the gray man with one ear who had visited him and told of Nephilim. If he wasn't Mortimer Jerrold, who was he?

As if he were taking a cue, the gray man came into the office, smiled pleasantly at Brad's astonished expression, and sat in the chair.

"You'd like help?" he asked.

"Yeah," Brad said softly, "but how did you know?"

"Your reporter told me that Homer Windsor was framing you. It's axiomatic that you'd like information to combat him."

"But you're dead," Brad blurted.

The gay man's colorless eyes widened slightly. Then he smiled. "All right," he said gently. "If you like, I'll pretend that I'm dead."

"I'm not pretending," Brad said. "I don't know why I said that. I can see you're as alive as I. But you're listed as dead in the county records. Your landlady believes it. She let me take your stuff. Look, I want to find out a lot of things from you."

"I haven't much time," the gray man said. "What is the most pressing?"

"I want first to know how to trap Homer Windsor. I want definite evidence that he's the head of a dope ring. How do I get it?"

The gray man began to talk. The events he described began several years earlier. He told how he first sampled the powdered delights of morphine. He told of his fear, and of the compulsion to translate the Lost Testament.

He told how he came into contact with Windsor. How this peddler and that protested ignorance of the identity of the big boss. How he accidentally learned that Windsor was the man.

He told how he approached Windsor, and threatened him with exposure. How he blackmailed

Windsor for food and drugs, and how he insured his life with the affidavits placed in the hands of a trusted friend.

Then he gave Brad a list of men to see. Brad copied them, and the data which accompanied each.

"This is the devil's work," the gray man said, "and I want to see it destroyed."

Brad's jaw dropped. "Huh?"

"The devil's work," the gray man repeated. "All the evil that man knows comes directly from Satan. Thank God for the chains of darkness which prevent him and his foul minions from communicating with man. I'm sorry, but I have stayed too long. I must go."

"Wait!" Brad exclaimed. "I've got much more important questions to ask than how to put the finger on a rat."

"Some other time," the gray man said. "I must go."

"But how can I find you? Where do you live?"

"I'll be back."

Brad's visitor pushed hurriedly through the door. Brad jumped to his feet to follow, but sat down again. After all, the guy was a free agent. If he wanted to go, he wanted to go. It was none of Brad's affair.

Besides, he didn't want to ask Sherry if she noticed which way he turned when he went out the door. He'd had trouble enough with Sherry about Mortimer Jerrold.

Funny, Brad thought, that a hophead would be so vehement about Satan. He'd sounded like a missionary. And he was probably loaded to the eyes with the stuff.

The hearing was set for ten a. m. At nine thirty, Brad had bathed, shaved and was knotting his tie when his doorbell rang. He went into the living

room, opened the door into the hotel corridor and blinked at Joe Balaam.

"Am I pinched, copper?"

"On the contrary." Joe Balaam smiled. "You're very probably a free man."

"Come in. What goes on?"

The swart officer came into the room and tossed a rolled paper on Brad's table. Brad noticed in passing that the roll seemed vaguely familiar, but he was more interested in Balaam.

"You may not believe this," Balaam said. "I wouldn't if someone told me the same story. Phil Douglas disappeared off a city street about an hour ago, in sight of a number of persons, including Homer Windsor."

Brad gasped: "I forgot to call Clare." As Balaam goggled, "Excuse the interruption. I understood you to say that Phil Douglas disappeared in broad daylight. What did you say, really?"

"Just that. He and Homer Windsor came out of Windsor's office a little after eight. I know, because I've been keeping tab on Douglas all I could, in hopes that I might pick up information which could be useful to you."

"Thanks, Joe."

"They went out to Windsor's car. Windsor got in, and Douglas walked around to get behind the wheel. That's the last I saw of him. Nobody else has seen him."

"Maybe he fell down a manhole."

"Sorry to say, but no. I looked."

"But a man just can't go up into thin air!"

"Several have, you know."

"I don't believe it, Joe."

"I don't care whether you believe it or not, Brad. I have trouble believing it myself, and I was there. The important thing is that his suit against you will probably be dropped. If the plaintiff is missing, there can't be much of a case."

"He'll show up," Brad said.

"I don't believe so. I gathered that Windsor was going to have the case dismissed. Homer was badly shaken."

"Who wouldn't be?" Brad said. "If it's true."

"You'll have to go to court to find out," Joe Balaam said. "In the meantime, glance at this."

He handed Brad the roll he had tossed on the table. Brad recognized it. The scroll. The Lost Testament of the Nephilim.

"Where—"

"Fiero found it in his apartment," Balaam said. "He couldn't make out what it is, but it's a scroll, and you were looking for one the other night. He asked me to show it to you. Is it the one?"

"Yes," Brad whispered. "Then somebody did steal it from me. Louie did slip me a Micky. Everybody lied to me."

"Fiero didn't take it," Balaam said hastily. "I was with him all the time. I got there the same time he and Sherry arrived."

"Then how did he get it?" Brad demanded.

"That," Joe Balaam said, "is beyond me. I don't know but what I'm glad it is. Remember, several have died because of this."

XI.

Joe Balaam accompanied Brad back to the office after the hectic courtroom scene. Sherry grinned when they entered.

"How about my fifty bucks?"

"I think you'll get it soon," Brad said.

"What didn't happen?"

"Arraignment," Brad said. "The plaintiff didn't appear. But Homer Windsor did. Everything sort of went to pieces when the tale of Phil Douglas' disappearance was spun."

He told her the story. Joe Balaam supplied his eyewitness testimony. Sherry frowned.

"What was he scared of? He had Windsor behind him. Why did he run away?"

"He didn't," Balaam said. "He simply vanished."

Sherry snorted. "It's just like the falling stones. I don't mind you kidding yourself, but lay off me. Douglas will turn up one of these days. How—about—my—fifty—bucks?"

"All right!" Brad said. "Do you want me to hock my car?"

"You'd be money ahead. Oh!" She flicked a glance toward the inner office. "I forgot. You have a caller."

Brad's heart jumped. Jerrold? He took firmer hold of the scroll which he had carried in one hand. "Who is it?"

"She didn't say. I've never seen her before."

"She? Clare? Is she pretty?"

"We-ell," Sherry said. "She looks like she was turned out on a lathe."

She did. The description was apt, Brad thought. His brief inspection before she flung herself into his arms as he entered the office itemized a tailored burgundy suit, burgundy hat with a pheasant quill, new dull black shoes with teetering heels, and an immense squashy bag to match.

"Darling!" she cried. She clamped him with both arms and said against his ear, "I escaped! I escaped!"

"Swell!" Brad gasped as he tried to loosen her arms. "That's fine."

He had to work with one hand, to protect the scroll in the other. She was not as sleek when he had peeled her away. Her hat was cocked a little too much, her jacket was twisted.

"You look cute," Brad said. "What happened?"

"Daddy and Phil Douglas both went away together this morning. Holmes isn't very active, and I got away from him. He's the butler, you know."

"Of course," Brad murmured. What a lot of

stars, he thought, can be crowded into eyes that are slightly popped.

"So here I am," she said. "We must hurry. When daddy finds me gone, he'll start a real search."

Brad sat at his desk, put chin on a fist, and squinted thoughtfuly. Clare's eyes were wide and puzzled.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm thinking."

"Aren't we going? Aren't we going to be married?"

"Oh, of course," Brad said impatiently. "But I've got to think out something."

"But I thought it was all settled." Her voice took on a querulous note.

Brad gave her a level stare. "Sit down a minute," he said quietly.

She did so, and he went back to his thoughts. Wherever they went, the political arm of her father could reach them, and who could tell what unpleasantness might come?

Was it better to go now, when it was possible to run, or stay and spike Windsor's guns by genteel blackmail?

Further, and more important, what was in the scroll? It must contain answers to troubling questions that Brad felt rather than phrased. A certain uneasiness stirred his faith in his visions, roiled it like the surface of a pool into which a pebble has fallen.

Here, a translator was at hand. Mortimer Jerrold. He would come again, or he could be found.

"But where can we hide you?" he said to Clare.

She blinked.

"Sorry," Brad said. "I spoke out of the middle of my mind. Listen."

He showed her the scroll. He explained his gnawing doubt.

"I've got to get it translated first," he said. "I've got to know."

"But I thought you already knew!"

"I do, damn it! I know that I am to be the father of an immortal. But I want to know what goes on. I want to know why. I want— Oh, hell, I guess I want more proof. I guess I don't quite believe, after all."

She got to her feet. Her elfin face took on a mystical quality. "I know," she said gravely. "I have faith. I am the mother of gods."

"Take it easy," Brad muttered.

"When you told me how hybrids felt, you were talking about me. The little fear. I've always had it. The being alone in a crowd. I know that feeling. The daydreams that almost make pictures, but not quite. I am the one. You are the one. Must we know more? Our son will rule the earth. Isn't that enough for any parent?"

"The point is—" Brad began.

"I never knew," she interrupted, "what I was meant to be, but I knew it was something big. I felt it. When you first told me, I was a little stunned. You were so sudden. You just hit me over the head with my dreams, and I went slightly to pieces. But I knew it was right. I know it now. So do you. Please, my chosen master, please!"

"Stop that!" Brad snapped. "Let's don't make a religion of this." He peered at her. "Going off the deep end isn't going to get us anywhere."

"Neither is waiting," she said. "Please, Mr. McClain!"

"I want to know what's in the scroll," Brad said stubbornly.

"But why? Why?"

"Because I want to. Isn't that reason enough?"

She didn't cry, she didn't pout. Not quite. Her wide eyes had a moist sheen, and her voice shook a little. "Daddy will lock me in again."

"Not if you don't go home. Wait here."

He went into the reception room. Ira Rafel had joined Sherry and Joe Balaam. Brad nodded to the reporter, and spoke to Sherry. "Will you come in a minute?" To Ira and the cop: "I'd like to talk to both of you. I'll be through in five minutes."

Sherry followed him back, and Brad introduced the two girls. "Can you put Miss Windsor up for a few days?" he asked Sherry.

"If she can put up with what I have."

"I'm sure it will be very pleasant," Clare said, "and amusing."

Sherry said nothing.

"I'll need some pajamas, a negligee and lingerie," Clare went on. She took a checkbook from her bag. "You can run out and get what I need."

"Why spend money?" Sherry said. "I can fix you up with whatever you need."

"We-ell, I really like good silk."

Sherry shrugged. "Might manage that, too. I gave up flour sacks when I was twenty-one."

"Really?"

Brad felt a trifle curled around the edges. Sherry was working for him, sure. But she was a human being, the same as Clare, and shouldn't be patronized. He felt faint shame for his fiancée.

"Well?" Sherry said. "What are we waitin' for? Let's get into gear."

Clare kissed Brad. "Good-by, darling. Come for me. I'll be waiting."

"So long," Brad said. "Do what Sherry says. We want you to stay out of sight." To Sherry: "Thanks."

She shrugged, took Clare's hand, and they went out. Joe Balaam and Ira came in as the girls went through the reception-room door. Ira stared after them for a moment from the doorway.

"Love and grief go hand in hand," he observed. He turned to Brad. "Who's the pretty half-wit?"

Brad drew himself up. "I'd like you to know that the young lady is my fiancée. We are going to be married."

Ira looked at him. After a few seconds, "No offense, old man."

Brad was furious at himself. He felt that he had been stuffy. Damn it, he thought, I *am* going to marry her. Why should I jump to her defense? What do I care how other people think of her? I guess my vanity is hurt. I guess I feel that she doesn't quite measure up. So what? That isn't the important thing. The important thing is my son.

The tension between the cop and reporter began to break through Brad's preoccupation. Joe Balaam was ill at ease, and threw a surly glance at Rafel now and then. The reporter, if he was affected at all, seemed to be calmly contemptuous.

Brad said: "Rafel, I'd like you to take an assignment. It concerns the story you brought in the other day."

Ira was casually attentive. "So you're going to run it after all?"

"At least, I want some more dope. I want it as quickly as possible, too. Here's a list of names. You can get leads from them."

He gave Ira the list which the gray man had given him. The reporter skimmed through it.

"How soon do you want it?"

"How soon do you think you can get it?"

"Will half an hour be soon enough?"

Brad's jaw dropped. "Half an— Hell, yes. Take a couple of days." He added flippantly: "This devil's work has been going on for years. A few more days won't hurt."

Joe Balaam jerked his dark head toward Brad. "What do you mean, devil's work?"

"We're out after the Old Man this time," Brad said humorously. "We'll spit him on his own pitchfork."

Balaam flung a puzzled look at Ira; then his olive face set grimly.

"You're being unfair, Brad."

"Unfair to whom?"

"Lucifer."

"How did he get into this?" Brad asked.

Balaam seemed unwilling to talk. He shook his head like a fighter who has been dazed by a wild punch. He turned eyes that were touched with fear on Brad, and spoke a smooth stream.

"One of the greatest fallacies of man is the supposition that earthly evil stems from Satan. How do we know? We have only one side of the argument. All the information we have about Satan is clearly prejudiced. The Old Testament is simply a piece of propaganda in that respect. It isn't fair! Let's hear the other side. Let's hear what Satan has to say!"

"For Heaven's sake!" Brad murmured. "What have we here?"

Balaam, who seemed to be caught up on a tide of emotion, swept on into his thought.

"A few men have seen this, notably Milton. Can you imagine his magnificent, tragic Lucifer noticing the petty misdeeds of man? We call him the father of lies, the old serpent, the tempter. That is ridiculous. Will one who was the Morning Star stoop to lie to one of us, ungainly clots of blood and hair? Will he tempt us? With what? Even his most casual thoughts must be incomprehensible to our degenerate brains. How could he tempt us, then, if he can't communicate?"

"Look," Brad said soothingly. "I was only joking."

"You'd make a joke of majesty?" Balaam flared. "That is dangerous, my friend. People take you seriously when you berate the Devil. Social and economic evils have been laid at his door for centuries, with no more evidence than a political tract. Listen. Can't you give man himself some credit for the blunders he's made? As long as there is a convenient peg, he hangs his misdeeds on it. 'The serpent tempted me,' he says. That's his creed, because he hasn't the moral courage to admit his own misdoing."

Brad listened to the harangue in bewilderment, tinged with faint unease. He felt that Balaam was speaking against his own convictions, struggling against the phrases which tumbled from his mouth. Brad also felt that Ira Rafel, standing expressionless against the wall, was enjoying this. There was a gleam in his dark eyes. No more, but it was enough.

"Let's not accept man's cowardly rationalization as truth," Balaam said.

He stopped abruptly. He looked steadily at Brad, with a lost and startled expression. He stared briefly at Ira, then shifted his eyes. He looked at the floor.

All the fine passion was gone when he spoke again. "I wouldn't convict anyone without a hearing," he mumbled.

Ira went to the door. "I'll get this stuff. See you tomorrow." He went out.

"Now," Brad said to Joe Balaam, "what was all that about?"

The cop stared at the door through which Ira had gone. "I . . . I—" He turned to Brad. "I don't know, Brad."

Brad tried to identify his fleeting sensation. Was it premonition of disaster? Fear? Simple uneasiness? It was gone so quickly, leaving a wash of goose flesh, that he could put no name to it.

"Let's talk about something else," Balaam said uneasily. "Why did you want me to wait?"

Brad moved a hand toward the scroll, but arrested the motion. "What's the matter with us?" he snapped. "A thug disappears apparently into thin air, and we have the same reaction as to an earthquake in Tasmania. We shrug, admit that he didn't show up at the trial, and adjust ourselves to the ordinary processes of living again. It isn't . . . uh . . . human."

"What would you suggest?" Balaam inquired mildly.

"I don't know. I feel damned uneasy about it. I've accepted it as a fact, filed it away under things unknown, and I'm ready to go on with life. It's the acceptance, not the fact, that annoys me. I feel that I ought to want to know why, and I don't give a damn. Where's my curiosity? I used to have plenty. Maybe—" He paused. "Maybe this thing has got me going."

He picked up the scroll. He opened it and looked at the strange symbols. "Could we get this translated, do you think?"

"Someone, somewhere, can do the job," Balaam said. "Why are you in such a fret?"

"I want to know about the Nephilim," Brad said. "Don't ask me why."

"All right. What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," Brad said fretfully. "I don't know anything. I have a bride waiting for me, the girl you said I'd marry. I have a . . . a . . . uh . . . job to do—I think. And I fool around with this. But I've got to know what's in it."

"You've also got Homer Windsor," Balaam pointed out. "Whatever his reason is for wanting you out of the way, it still exists. He's going to be unhappier, now that Phil Douglas has—well, gone."

"But you know," Brad said, "I have a feeling that I'm going to be all right, that nothing is going to happen to me. There isn't any basis for it. I just feel it. Like you felt, maybe, that you ought to turn me in, I feel that I should go on with this project regardless of personal considerations."

"Brad," Joe Balaam said earnestly, "listen to me a moment. You know that my hunches, so far, are infallible. You have seen them pay off. Right?"

"Well?"

"Well, I have a notion that you'd be much better off to drop everything in connection with your present situation. The girl, this scroll—which seem connected some way—and Homer Windsor. Although I don't know why you are warring with him, I imagine you could straighten the difficulty. You know your way around."

Brad stared. "Why, this is an about-face for you. Every hunch you've had has pushed me farther into this mess. Now you reverse yourself."

Balaam twiddled his fingers in a nervous motion. "I just had this flash, Brad, and it's different. It—bothers me. It makes me uncomfortable. But I feel that it's right. I feel it strongly."

"Copper, I've got to know what goes on. If I can learn what these things are, I think I'll know everything. I'm in a spot which I can't tell you about, and I've got a decision to make. I can't make it until I know what this thing—this *Kishev*, as Jerrold called it—says. Jerrold. By the way, he was—" Brad caught himself. Balaam was certain that Jerrold was dead. Why tell him about the second visit of the gray man? "Let it go, let it go. Well, what do we do about a translator?"

"Do you want me to look one up?"

"Will you? Then I'll take it to him."

"What about those who have died on the same job?"

"Do you believe that?" Brad countered.

Balaam shrugged. "I don't know. I don't know anything about this set-up. The more I'm near it, the less I want to know."

"You'd rather not have anything to do with it, then?"

"Frankly, yes. I want to help you if I can, but I'm a little afraid to step into this."

Brad stood up. "I'm going to know, one way or another. And I guess the best thing to do first is to see Fiero, and find out how he came by this thing. Where'll I find him, do you know?"

"At Louie's, most likely. Do you mind if I come along?"

"Not at all."

Brad's telephone rang.

"One moment, please," a feminine voice said. "Mr. Windsor wishes to speak to you."

Homer Windsor's voice said: "McClain? Come to my office at once. I'm waiting."

"Go to hell," Brad said.

XII.

Sherry came back to the apartment with her armload of groceries, and as she took them through to the kitchen, tossed a glance at the lowered level of the brandy bottle on the table beside Clare.

"Having fun?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you." Clare reached for her glass, trailing the cuff of Sherry's blue quilted robe through the bowl of ice cubes. "May I mix you a drink?"

"Please," Sherry called from the kitchen. She set the groceries on the kitchen table and went into the living room.

Clare splashed a little soda on a large drink, and Sherry took it to the divan, from which she watched Clare mix one for herself.

"I think I shall have one," Clare said, halfway through the operation. "Drink never affects me," she announced. "I drink just to have something in my hand, the way you smoke a cigarette."

Sherry said, "Oh?"

"It's awfully decent of you to let me move in

this way," Clare said. She sloshed a few drops of brandy on the table top, and Sherry frowned. "I don't like to take your bed, though."

"Think nothing of it," Sherry murmured. "Brad wants it that way."

"Isn't he wonderful? How lucky I am!"

Sherry sipped at her drink.

Clare tossed hers off, mixed another. "Lucky, lucky me," she said. She twisted her glass in reflective fingers. "When I think of all the women who never find the man they're meant for, I feel humble. I could crawl on my hands and knees."

Sherry's eyes glinted, but she said nothing.

"It's so romantic," Clare went on dreamily, "how he came into my life. One day I had never heard of him, the next we were practically engaged. Mother of an immortal," she added in a voice touched with awe.

Sherry's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"And our son will rule the earth. Oh, I'm so . . . so—"

"What the devil are you talking about?" Sherry snapped.

Clare stared. "Why, I supposed you knew. He has such confidence and trust in you, my dear, I supposed he had told you. Maybe I'd better say no more about it."

Sherry shrugged.

"No," Clare said. "I'll tell you. I'm sure he won't mind. You've been *such* a help to him. We both appreciate it, and I feel you have a right to know. You may think I'm talking because I've had a drink, but that isn't so. I'm in complete command of my facluties . . . falcul . . . of myself."

"Obviously, dear."

"Brad and I are part angel," Clare said. "That's the sum and total of it."

Sherry went over to the little table, added brandy and soda to her glass. "I need this," she said. "Do go on."

"I'm not boring you?"

"Not at all, not at all."

"Thank you," Clare said gravely. "I know you will be happy for him, because he has found what he must have. You *are* fond of him, aren't you?"

Sherry's mouth set. "I'm fond of him," she said levelly.

"Somehow, I knew you were, dear. That makes it all right to tell you."

"Can you tell me while I work in the kitchen? I'd like to get dinner over and the dishes washed. I've got a heavy date, and I'd like to do a careful job getting ready."

"With Brad?" Clare asked.

"No. Relax. With a fiddler."

While Sherry made salad, heated rolls in the oven, and broiled steak, Clare lounged in the doorway and told the story Brad had told her. As the tale progressed, Sherry's mouth set in firmer, grimmer lines, and she burned the steak and forgot to rub the salad bowl with garlic.

Twilight stalked the fading sunset as Brad and Joe Balaam drove along the twisting road to Louie's, but there was light enough for Brad to identify in his mirror the big blue sedan which had hung within driving distance since they had left the office. Whatever significance he might have attached to the event was driven out of his mind by Balaam's monologue.

"It's a sound theory, at that," the cop said. "Of course, we can judge only by human standards, but if we are made in the image of the Deity, our standards should be fairly authentic reflections."

Brad said: "Maybe I'm not quite bright. Maybe that's why you might as well be speaking in Sanskrit."

"I mean the theory that Lucifer has been ill used by humanity. If there was war in heaven, according to the old tale, each side must have been justified in their own eyes. We can assume that the difference of opinion was honest, at least. Then whoever lost was wrong, in the winner's eyes. Right prevailed, and that conviction must have colored the accounts of the battle and its consequences."

"Whoever wins the war writes the history, hm-m-m?"

"That's our practice," Balaam said. "And you know how our histories tell—well, the truth, yes, but sometimes not the whole truth. Years after a battle has ended, we hear the loser's side, and it changes our opinion."

"What are you trying to do? Sanctify Satan?"

"Not at all. But I do think he should have the right to give his side. We have taken all available information about him at face value, but we have only the winner's account."

"Suppose Satan had won. What would we have?"

"The same thing in reverse."

"Do you mean," Brad asked, "that the basis for mankind's conduct would be the will to do evil, instead of good?"

"I do not. Listen, Brad. Whoever is in the driver's seat up there must run things about as they are now. Otherwise, the whole thing would collapse. Man would kill himself off, and the driver would have nothing but the memory of a big fight. He'd have nothing to drive, and what would be the pleasure of that?"

"I'm confused. Are you trying to sell me Satan?"

"No, Brad. I simply contend that, even if Satan had won, conditions wouldn't be greatly different from what they are now. I've never given the subject any thought before. When I blew my top in your office, I felt as if somebody else was putting the words in my . . . er . . . my mind. But I've

been thinking about it, and it seems to me that it doesn't make much difference who rules. We'll come out at the same door in the end."

"Wherever that is."

"It really doesn't matter *where* it is, since we are inevitably headed there."

Brad thought of his last vision, in the jail. The angel had said that Armageddon need not come to pass, if McClain kept faith.

"Inevitably?" Brad murmured. "Inevitably?"

"Of course. If Satan had triumphed, the history would have varied in detail—names reversed, and so on—but its general course must have been similar. That's why I say we are doing Lucifer an injustice by laying at his doorstep every petty crime on the calendar, from traffic violations to murder. 'The serpent tempted me.' Hah!"

"I have a racial disinclination to believe you," Brad said. "But, looking at it as objectively as possible, I don't see how your conclusion is inevitable."

"Listen, Brad. Is a being who has lost a whole world going to annoy that world in the process of winning it back? If Satan has tried, or is trying, to gain control, he isn't going to torture us, whom he hopes to rule. That would be idiotic. Therefore it's illogical to say he is responsible for grief, and crime, and our unhappiness."

"Who is, then?"

"Man himself. He must be, mustn't he? It would be quite as idiotic for the Deity to cause it."

Brad didn't answer. He didn't think for long on Joe Balaam's story. The cop seemed to have finished, and they rode in silence until Louie's showed around a turn. "I need some beer," Brad said.

They found Fiero in the little room, playing softly to himself. They stood quietly in the doorway, unnoticed, and looked up at the huge violinist while his fingers and bow pulled a soft but powerful and mysterious strain from the golden-brown instrument.

In contrast to the two former occasions when he had heard Fiero play, Brad felt vague discomfort as unconventional intervals cascaded from the violin. There was color here, and form, and life, too. But the color was disquieting, the form unfamiliar, and the life repugnant.

Joe Balaam seemed to feel it, also, for his dark hands were knotted at his side, dark eyes fixed, dark face set. Fiero himself seemed unaware of the music, his technique, his visitors, and the setting. His great head was tilted back, his eyes closed, his wide mouth slightly parted, and he swayed gently on long, widespread legs.

It did not occur to Brad to interrupt before Fiero ended the strain on a harmonic so high as to be almost inaudible. Fiero's music impelled. Despite its beautiful fragility, the thread of melody which he wove into stirring patterns tied one's hands and was a barrier to conscious thought.

Fiero turned, gave them his gentle smile. "Hello."

Brad shook himself. "Uh, hello. Hope we're not interrupting your practice."

"There's always tomorrow," Fiero said. "Do you want to come in or go into the bar?"

"In here. I got things to say."

Louie brought Brad and Joe a mug of beer each, and closed the door as he went out. Brad raised his mug, inclined his head in salute, and drank. Then, "Where did you find this?" he asked Fiero, and held up the scroll.

Fiero stopped plucking soft chords. "In my room. In the drawer under my shirts."

"How did you get it?" Brad asked.

"I don't know. I found it accidentally. I don't know how long it had been there. It looks interesting."

Brad gulped. "You can't read it, can you?"

"I guess I could puzzle it out in time. Ancient Hebrew isn't one of my strong points, though."

"Will you?" Brad asked eagerly. "Will you?"

All of Brad's deep feeling was in the question, and even he found the starkness of his emotion somewhat embarrassing. It was like taking your hair down in public, he thought. Brutal honesty causes eyes to shift away, to regard their owner's hands, causes feet to shuffle uneasily, and mouths to freeze in shadows of smiles.

Into the silence, he said in a calmer tone: "Maybe I'd better tell you. I'll have to tell it sometime, and you two are my friends."

The smiles thawed; the eyes met his. "It's like this," he began.

He told it from the beginning, from his childhood visions down to the present. He told them of Clare, and of his certainty that she was the mate chosen by the angel of his vision. He told them, also, of his faint doubts, his desire to know, his belief that the facts he lacked were contained in this Lost Testament of the Nephilim.

"If I can get it translated," he said, "I'll know what to do."

"May I ask a question?" Balaam said. "If your theory is true—that is, if these visions are not psychotic in nature—we may assume that the account of Mortimer Jerrold is true. We can believe that some force or being or beings are determined that this scroll shall not be translated. Right?"

"Yes," Brad said heavily. "Yes. Let's forget it. I'm not going to get somebody killed over it. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"But if it isn't true," Fiero contributed, "it won't make any difference."

"It's true, all right," Brad said.

"You can't prove it."

Mr. Boles spoke humbly to the entity of the glowing pillar. "If we knew better what the Plan was, we could act more—"

"I know," Brad said earnestly. "I don't have to prove it to myself."

"Then why don't you go ahead with your plans? Why insist on a translation?"

"I don't know," Brad said. "I believe I'm essentially correct, but something is lacking. Maybe it's in the scroll."

"Far as I can see," Fiero said pleasantly, "you've got an insoluble problem. If your theory is correct, you get somebody killed trying to prove it, and if it isn't, there's no point in the whole thing. As I said, I could translate this, but it would take several weeks. I'd have to borrow some books."

"Who owns the books?"

"My archaeology ex-prof."

"Could he—"

"He's a whiz," Fiero said. "He could knock it out almost as fast as he could write."

"And get killed," Brad said. "Let's forget it. I'll go ahead with what I've planned."

"What makes you so sure that your experience has any basis in truth?" Joe Balaam asked.

"Mortimer Jerrold," Brad said. "His story, and how my visions tie into it. Fiero. His story of gigantic footprints in Arizona. The name Nephilim. It meant nothing when my angel used it time after time. I couldn't possibly have heard it before, because my experience pattern doesn't cross any source. And Phil Douglas. What *did* happen to him? And why? Am I being protected by . . . by . . . well, what?"

"I don't know," Balaam said hurriedly. "I'm slightly nervous about it. I saw it, but I don't believe it."

"You sound like you're afraid," Brad said.

Joe Balaam looked at him. "I have never been more frightened, Brad. Take my advice and drop the whole thing."

"What are you scared of?"

"I don't know. I'm just scared."

"Maybe you're a hybrid, and the fear doesn't mean a thing. It's just a characteristic, like the feeling that you're coming down with something after a hard night. Fiero can tell you."

Fiero plucked at his strings and smiled softly. "But I can't. I've never felt any of these things you told about. The . . . the . . . yearnings, the nagging worries that you can't identify, the

feeling that somebody's staring at you while you're the only person in sight. I never felt it."

"I figured you as a cinch," Brad said. "Your size and all."

Fiero shrugged. "I have my music. That takes all my leisure time." He got to his feet. "What do you want me to do? I've got to leave and get dressed and fed for a date."

"Nothing," Brad said dolefully. "Nothing, I guess, except keep quiet. If it's true, you'd die, or your prof. He doesn't mean anything to me, but I can't ask him to risk his life. The hell with it. I'll learn how to translate it later. Surely nothing will happen to me."

"How do you know?" Joe Balaam asked tensely. "How do you know?"

Brad felt a ripple of goose flesh, and ignored the question. "Thanks, anyway," he said to Fiero.

"Can I offer you a ride into town?" Fiero asked.

"Not if Brad's going now," Balaam said. "I rode out with him."

"I'm going to have a couple of drinks," Brad said. "Go ahead if you want."

"Well, I must check in at headquarters. After all, I am a working cop."

"Thanks for everything," Brad said.

Brad sat at the bar, the only customer. After several brilliant-toothed attempts at conversation, Louie gave up and mixed Scotch and soda when Brad's glass was empty.

Brad felt the Call again. He set his glass aside, put his head on folded arms, and relaxed. The dark face of his angel appeared, and made the briefest statement to date:

"The time is now, McClain. Go!"

The vision faded, and Brad raised his head to see Louie regarding him curiously. Brad attempted a weak smile, and Louie flashed a cupful of front teeth.

"You feeling dopey, Mr. McClain?"

"No. It's nothing."

"You sure looking dopey," Louie said pleasantly.

"So long," Brad said, and left.

So all right, he thought as he drove away. If it's true, this is the right thing. If it's phony, I can get a divorce. But I can't. I can never be sure. I'll never know. I'll die before my son, in the ordinary course of events, whether he's mortal or not. Without a translation of the scroll, it's a gamble.

Well, what can I lose? I can lose Sherry. I guess I'd better lose her. I can't take a chance on being wrong.

He became aware of a car hanging even with him, edging in closer, in the act of passing but not gaining. Brad slowed, to allow the car to go on. Its pace dropped. It edged nearer. He pulled a little to the right, and flung a look at the car.

It was the blue sedan, and three men were in it. He who was beside the driver pointed a gun at Brad.

"This is far enough, buddy. Don't be a fool."

"Don't worry," Brad said. He eased his car to a stop.

The blue sedan stopped beside him, and the gunman made a gesture with his black-hatted head. "Leave your heap. Get in here."

"Listen," Brad said. "What goes on? What do you want with me?"

"Get in here," Black Hat repeated, not raising his voice.

Brad took the scroll from behind the seat, and got into the sedan beside a slim young man in the back seat.

"If you're quiet," the slim young man said, "we'll all be happier."

"But what's it all about?" Brad demanded as the sedan moved along the road again. "Oh, I forgot. Homer Windsor, huh? You're his office boys?"

Nobody said anything.

XIII.

Homer Windsor did not rise from behind his desk in the library where Brad had met Clare and decided that she was the only hybrid to bear his son. Brad was herded gently but firmly into the room, and he stood at poised ease on widespread feet and faced his chosen father-in-law. Brad tilted a sardonic grin, but Windsor was not amused.

"The police would be only too happy to find my daughter," he said. "But this way is more private, more efficient, and *can* be more satisfactory to me personally. Where is she?"

"She's an adult," Brad pointed out. "She has a moral and legal right to go where she likes. And she likes it where she is."

"I don't want to resort to crude methods, McClain."

"Send these playboys away," Brad said. "I want to talk to you, not fence with you."

Windsor inclined his iron-gray head at Slim and Black Hat. "But not too far," he specified.

They slouched through the door, which Brad closed behind them. He lit a cigarette, sat on the divan, and made a whiskey and soda from the tray beside it.

"I'll make you a bargain, Mr. Windsor."

Windsor didn't change expression.

"Clare and I want to marry," Brad went on. "If you will leave us alone, I won't wreck your playhouse."

Windsor's eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch. He did not change expression.

"Does the name Mortimer Jerrold mean anything to you?" Brad inquired.

Quietly, "A very great deal," Windsor said.

"This is the way it stacks up, sir. I have all the

facts that Jerrold had, and more. I don't intend to use them unless I'm forced to. I want Clare. I'll trade you, your daughter for your reputation."

"My daughter isn't for sale," Windsor snapped.

"I phrased it badly," Brad said quickly. "What I'm trying to buy is a mutual agreement. You leave me alone, I'll leave you alone. You don't object to me personally, do you? Isn't it just that I'm a newspaper publisher?"

Windsor was thoughtful. "Yes," he admitted. After a few more seconds of thought, Windsor said: "You don't make sense. You're not running true to form, and I don't trust you."

"I don't get you."

"You publish a muck rag, which most political weeklies must be between elections. When you're not being paid to support office seekers or holders, you skirt the edge of libel in your attacks on incumbent individuals and organizations. You must do this, to hold your readers. I know what kind of information you have about me and my activities. It should make you jump up and down. You could gain a great deal of notice, and perhaps make some money, by printing what you have. Yet you not only have not used it, but you are willing to junk the proud ideals newsmen boast of. Why?"

"I'm not junking anything," Brad said. "I'm just taking the long view. It's highly important that Clare and I marry. You and your rackets are trifling beside our reasons. You'll kick off one of these days, and somebody else will take your place. Maybe he won't be as smart as you, and he'll be knocked over. But the reason for and the effect of our getting married is big, bigger than vice, crime, or this present world war. All these things are beneath consideration."

"Well!" Windsor exclaimed. "Well! Those are big words."

"They don't do the subject justice."

"What is this tremendous thing?" Windsor asked.

Brad automatically dropped his eyes to the scroll which he had laid across his knees. He looked at Windsor. "Since it won't have any effect on you, now or ever, I see no reason to tell you."

The room was quiet, except for the tap of Windsor's fingers on his desk and the tinkle of ice in Brad's glass. Brad ran his eyes around the orderly shelves of books, and wished again that they were his. After his marriage, he thought, he would spend considerable time in this room.

"I could have you arrested for kidnaping," Windsor said.

"Don't be stupid," Brad snorted. "She left here under her own power, and is staying where she is of her own free will."

"The case could be tailored a little and be made to fit."

Brad was aghast. "You'd have her killed? You couldn't make it stick, otherwise. You'd do that, to your daughter?"

"No!" Windsor exploded. More quietly: "Of course not."

Brad almost grinned. He reflected on his drink for a moment, sipped it. "You know? I could like you, maybe, if—"

Windsor's keen eyes were politely questioning.

"If you weren't in such a filthy business," Brad said. "Have you seen your finished product? Boys who will steal anything to get the junk? Old women who forage in alleys, men who scream in hospitals and jails? No, I guess I could never like you, Windsor. I cringe a little, dealing with you. But I'll deal, because what happens to a segment of the population now is less important than what will happen to the whole later."

"How do I know you'll play fair?" Windsor said. "You guarantee to turn over to me whatever evidence you have. How do I know what you'll hold back, perhaps to give certain authorities?"

"How do I know you'll play fair, once you get it? I'll tell you. Clare. She keeps us both in line. Whatever you do to me will hurt her, and vice versa. My question on whether you'd harm her to get to me was not idle. I wanted to be sure. It's more damaging to her if she's hurt than if she's killed. She feels it longer. So I don't think you'll double-cross me."

"I'm not so sure about you."

"I've had this evidence for some time. If it hadn't been for Clare, I'd have used it."

"All right, McClain. I'll deal. Where is it?"

"I can get it in thirty minutes. Will you call a cab?"

"You'll be furnished transportation."

"O. K. What do I do, give it to those thugs who kidnaped me?"

Windsor clapped his hands. The slim and dapper man came in, eyes flicking about the room.

"Take him where he wants to go," Windsor said. To Brad: "Go ahead." To Slim, as Brad went into the hall: "Just a second."

Brad joined Black Hat, they were presently joined by Slim, and the trio went out to the car with the driver who seemed to have no distinguishable characteristic except silence. Brad instructed him to drive to the office building where the Jerrold affidavits were filed.

No attempts at conversation disturbed the silence of that swift, efficient ride. Slim accompanied Brad to his office, and Brad gave him the documents.

"We'll take you to your car," Slim said.

"Don't trouble yourself. I'll take a cab."

"No trouble. We want to do the decent thing."

"O. K. Thanks."

Slim gave instructions to the driver, and five minutes later they slid to a stop across the

deserted road from Brad's coupé. As Brad leaned toward the door, Slim hit him behind one ear with his gun, and Brad fell forward on his face.

"What the hell?" Black Hat said.

"We're to work him over," Slim said. "Here, take this. The boss wants it." He tossed the scroll into the driver's lap.

"This is a hell of a place to bump a guy," Black Hat said.

"We're not going to bump him. Just kick him a little. Around the ribs, mostly, and kidneys. Not much in the face. Well, throw him out. There isn't room enough in her to swing a foot."

Together, they threw Brad out on the graveled shoulder. Then, deliberately, one on each side, they kicked Brad in the sides and now and then in the face. They were not vicious. They were like a carpenter driving nails, or a football player practicing drop kicks.

"Don't kill him," Slim cautioned as Black Hat's heel crunched against the back of Brad's skull.

Presently, Slim called a halt. He crossed the road to Brad's car, took a folded sheet of paper from his coat pocket and fastened it under the edge of Brad's horn button. The driver of the blue sedan made a U turn, Slim jumped in, and they drove away.

When Brad came to, he was sure he had been run through a pencil sharpener. Except for his head. Somebody had sawed a section of his skull away and filled the inside with a hailstorm. He opened his eyes on far-dancing stars, and groaned. He moved a finger. He tried a foot. He wriggled. No bones broken.

Then he remembered. He was too racked with pain to be angry as yet, but he remembered. He turned his head, saw that his car was across the road and, with hailstones bounding against the back of his eyeballs, crawled across the ribbon of cement.

He scrabbled into his coupé, and saw the note; he read it by his dome light:

This was a friendly gesture. It was strictly for your own good. Don't meddle.

The note was unsigned. Before he turned out the light, Brad opened his shirt and examined the red splotches on his skin. They would turn purple later, he knew, and from the throb of one eye he judged he'd have a historic mouse.

Then he was angry.

It was not a cold, calm, killing anger. It was hot, because it was futile. There was nothing he could do. Except be sick, which he promptly was.

He scrambled out onto the running board, put his head between his knees, and with each spasm his helpless fury mounted. Tears of weak rage salted his lips.

"Damn it!" he hiccupped into the silent night.

He was so weak when calmness came again that he barely had strength to lift his head toward approaching footsteps clopping along the empty highway.

A figure of disturbing familiarity came briskly toward him from the direction of the city, and Brad saw presently that it was dressed in blue jeans, that it had a battered hat on a white gleam of hair.

"Hel . . . *hup!* . . . hello, Mr. . . . *hoop!* . . . Boles."

"McClain, you'll catch your death out here," Mr. Boles said fussily. "What's the matter with you, are you drunk?"

"I had an accident," Brad said. "I'm hurt. I'm bruised and bleeding."

"Let me see."

Mr. Boles pulled Brad's shirt away, and Brad winced.

"There's a flashlight behind the seat," he groaned.

"For Heaven's sake, hold still!" Mr. Boles snapped. "I don't need a flashlight. Does that hurt?" Mr. Boles pressed his fingers against a rib.

"Yes!" Brad yelled. Then, in a tone of amazement, "Why, no. It's stopped."

"And there?" Mr. Boles asked. "And there, there, there?"

"Say!" Brad demanded. "What is this? The pain's going. It feels wonderful. Do it some more, Mr. Boles."

"There? There?" Mr. Boles' hands were busy, darting here and there, touching, soothing, driving pain away. He fingered Brad's face. "I think you'll be all right. Good night."

"Wait a minute!" Brad looked wonderingly at the old man who halted as he faced away. "Say . . . uh, why—" He felt himself, where he had not dared rub a finger. "Why, I'm all right! Well, say, uh, thanks."

"You're welcome, I'm sure," Mr. Boles said testily. "And now good night."

"Let me give you a lift," Brad said. "It's the least I can do. Listen, Mr. Boles, how did you do it? Of course, I've heard of people with electricity in their hands, or something, but I always thought it was a lot of bunk. Is that what you've got?"

"I suppose so, McClain. No, I won't ride with you. I frequently walk out here, for the exercise. Good night."

"G'night. And thanks again."

Brad watched the old man stride crisply away, then got behind the wheel and started home. He reflected on the treatment he had received from Windsor's thugs, and his anger returned. A cooled anger, however, cooled by his amazing experience with Mr. Boles, and by his excellent well-being. He had no aches and pains. He had no bruises.

He was not really angry. Why bother, then, with revenge? Getting a translation was the pressing item, a translation of the—

He slid his wheels in stopping the car. "Good heavens!" he said aloud. He made a U turn, drove back to the spot.

He jumped out, swept the ground with the beam of his flash. Presently, he re-entered his car and went home.

Ira was waiting for him when he arrived late at the office on the next morning. Brad unlocked the door, led the way into his office, and Ira tossed a sheaf of documents on Brad's desk.

"There it is," he said.

Brad ran a negligent eye through the sheaf. Here were statements by men named by the gray man. They incriminated Windsor to an even greater degree than had the Jerrold affidavits. They didn't interest Brad particularly, at first. Then he suddenly snapped a hand at the telephone.

He was a fraction late, for the phone jangled as he reached.

"Hello," he said.

"This is Fiero," said a voice. "Would you still like to get a quick translation of that scroll?"

"Why, why, y-yes," Brad stammered. "Aren't you doing an about face?"

"I talked to Sherry last night," Fiero said.

"Huh? I don't get it."

"She told me the same thing you did, but hers was secondhand. Your gal told her."

"She did, eh?"

"Yes," Fiero said. "But look. We're just wasting time. I'll get the translation on this basis. I'll tell my ex-prof the story, and of the others who are supposed to have died. If he wants to tackle it after that, all right."

"Well, I'll tell you," Brad stalled. "Let me think it over. Where can I call you?"

Fiero told him, and hung up. Brad dialed the Windsor house.

"Speak to Homer Windsor, please."

"Mr. Windsor, sir, is dead," answered what was apparently the butler's voice.

"What?"

"Yes, sir. I discovered the body in the library only this moment, and was in the act of telephoning the hospital. Your call came as I was reaching for the telephone."

"This is Brad McClain, of the *Independent*," Brad said. "Will you do me a favor? I'm a friend of Miss Clare's, you know. I'll send a reporter over right now; will you let him have the story first? We've got to spare Miss Clare's feelings, you know, as much as possible."

"Yes, sir," said the butler. "Shall I telephone the police?"

"By all means," Brad said. "But don't tell them why, unless— Listen, how did he die? Shot? Beaten?"

"Oh, no, sir. He appears to have dropped off to sleep."

"Then call his doctor! He may not be dead. Maybe he can be revived."

"Yes, sir. But he's dead, I'm certain."

Brad hung up and turned to Ira. "You seem to be very good at getting things. Jump out to Windsor's, and see if you can find a parchment scroll anywhere. I'm just playing a hunch, but I think you'll find it on his desk in the library."

"And—"

"And bring it back here, without anybody catching you, if you can. I'll give you a bonus, if you do it."

"What is this scroll?"

"You know what parchment is? Well, that's all. It's in ancient Hebrew, and it's probably Greek to you. Just get it, that's all."

"I know a little of the language," Ira said. "Give me a better identification."

"The title is probably, 'The Lost Testament of the Nephilim.' Brad spelled the last word. Hurry, before cops clutter the joint."

Ira hurried.

Brad sat at his desk and pondered the situation. If Windsor, as Brad suspected, had begun a translation, with the aid of books in his extensive library or by his own unsuspected knowledge, and had been mysteriously killed as the others were reputed to have been, what about Fiero's ex-professor of archaeology?

I can't give it to him, Brad thought. It would be murder. Maybe. What about Jerrold? He didn't die. He was in here twice, after he was reported and recorded a corpse. But . . . but— Something phony there. Why did he drop out of sight? Why do people think him dead? People do funny things. He had his reasons for disappearing, I guess. I know he's alive, I saw him. Talked to him, listened to him.

But Windsor is dead, and his stooges took the scroll. I must have tipped its importance when I glanced at it and refused to answer his question about my project with Clare.

Clare. She's a free agent, now. She won't have to hide any more. Sherry'll be glad.

Who'll break the news to Clare? I don't want to. What do you say? "You can go home now, toots, your old man kicked the bucket." "Miss Windsor, it is my sad duty to inform you that—" Nuts. Let Sherry do it. She'll know what to say.

He raised his eyes as the reception door opened, and Sherry entered. He carried on with his thought automatically:

"I've got a job for you. Will you tell Clare that—" He stopped. "What are you doing here?"

"I want to talk to you," Sherry said grimly.

XIV.

After some twenty minutes of listening, Sherry stood up from the chair.

"I hate to break into this entrancing tale," she said, "but does your angelic majesty give a hoot whether we get a paper out or not? Copy has to be at the printer's by midnight, you know."

Brad's shoulders stiffened. "Even in the face of the evidence, you don't believe any of it?"

Sherry pursed her lips. "I wouldn't say that. I'm sure you believe it. Butter wouldn't melt in those big, brown eyes. But me—well, are we still printing a paper?"

"Sherry, listen. You've got to believe that I'm sincere, and also that there is a factual basis for what I'm doing. You've got to. It's very important."

"Do you mean that you'd chuck the whole business if I don't believe it? Your convictions aren't very strong, then, my friend."

"No-o," Brad said. "I don't mean that. I'm going through with it. But it'll be easier, and more fun, if you help instead of scoff."

"Yes, sir. I'll help, sir, honest I will. But please, sir, will you push the halo out of your eyes and tell me about the paper, sir?"

"Damn it!" Brad flared. "What do I care about a paper?" When Sherry didn't answer, but stood waiting with demure hands folded at the throat of her green silk blouse, "All right!" he snapped. "Bring your notebook and whatever material you have. Let's get to work."

Sherry went into her office, then stuck her head back around the edge of the door. "You'll never go through with this if you don't face your main problem and solve it. You haven't faced it. You see, your big trouble is that you love me, and not Clare."

She slammed the door.

Brad stared at it. He wasn't thinking; he just stared. The situation was beginning to churn in his mind, beginning not to make sense. So he stared at the door.

His telephone rang. Clare. She was crying.

"Oh, my dear daddy!" she wailed. "I wasn't good to him. I made him miserable these last few days, and he'll . . . he'll never know how I loved him."

A guilty flush spread on Brad's face. He had forgotten. He had been so anxious to win Sherry's approval that it had slipped his mind.

"I'm very sorry," he said gently. "How did you find out?"

"I called home. I had to. He had tied up my checking account. Oh, darling, what can I do? I wouldn't have disobeyed daddy for the world, and he thought I had."

"You had better go home, my dear. That's where you belong. As soon as I can, I'll come and help you."

"Yes," she sniffled. "Yes. My place is at his side. Darling, you must be very good to me. It will take a long time to make this up to me."

Brad blinked. Then, resigned, "I will. It was my fault."

"Good-by," she said. "Good-by, my lord."

Brad looked at the phone with dull, dark eyes and pondered the change in Clare. She had been perfectly willing to go through with the marriage. Willing? Anxious, even, without consulting Homer Windsor. He shrugged. One thing was certain: she was a trifle psychotic.

Brad McClain sighed.

The situation weighed on him so that he did not raise his eyes when Sherry brought him a wire basket full of publicity releases. She said nothing, and Brad began working his way through the pile of stuff that he customarily consigned to the wastebasket. He edited out the most flamboyant phrases, wrote headlines and dummied the stories on blank, columned forms until Ira Rafel entered with the scroll and a heavy book.

"I thought I'd bring this, too," he said, dropping the book in front of Brad. "Since the scroll is yours, you might want to translate it. Which is what Windsor was doing."

"Did anybody see you take these?"

The reporter's dark face was shocked, then scornful. "I'm not exactly a fool."

"Get Sherry's clips and rewrite 'em," Brad ordered. "We'll need shorts, lots of one-paragraph stories. Had the doc made his report?"

"Heart failure, is all. There'll be an autopsy. The cops were arriving when I left."

"Was Clare there?"

"I saw her," Rafel said noncommittally.

"How is she?"

"Crying, but not spoiling her make-up."

Ira went into the front office. Brad thumbed through the Hebrew-English dictionary absently, then telephoned Fiero.

"If you make it clear to your professor that several persons have died while trying to translate this scroll, I'll turn it over to you, Fiero. Otherwise, I'll do it myself. The pressure is off for the time being." He told about Clare's father. "She isn't in hiding now. She can wait."

"I told him," Fiero said. "The old man is very anxious to do it. He'd heard about that Jewish synagogue in Honan, and is all hot for this manuscript. Naturally, being a scientist, he scoffs at your theory. But he says he's lived a long time. If he dies, he dies, and that's an end to it. By the way, I'm sorry about Clare's father."

"It'll teach him a lesson," Brad said shortly.

He made arrangements to meet Fiero in front of the building and deliver the manuscript, worked

a few minutes longer, then started out. He didn't look at Sherry when he entered her office.

"Go out and dig up everything nice about Windsor that you can," he said to Rafel. "That's the main story." He turned to the door.

"Will your brightness return?" Sherry asked.

Brad didn't answer. He waited downstairs for Fiero, gave him the scroll, ducked across the street for a drink, and went back to work.

"Will you come in?" Brad asked Sherry coldly. "I want to dictate an editorial."

"Yes, my lord," Sherry murmured.

"Don't call me that!" Brad shouted. "I'm sick and tired of it, see?"

He slammed into his office. Sherry's jaw squared, a film of tears gave her eyes a blue sheen, and she followed silently.

"I didn't mean to shout," Brad said as she sat waiting.

Sherry said nothing.

They worked for a couple of hours, and never uttered a single personal remark. When hunger interrupted, in the later afternoon, they went across the street for a sandwich, beer and strictly business talk about the paper.

They talked about type, and doggedly argued the respective merits of Goudy and Bodoni Ultrabold for announcements of Windsor's unexpected death.

They went back to the office, and were cleaning up the tag ends—political calendar of next week's events, predictions of legislative action in State and county, Brad's personal column, a publicity puff for the mayor—when Fiero followed his knock inside.

Fiero was funereal. There was no pleasant cast to his face, no gentle grin. No arrogant tilt of curly, brown head, no pride in the slump of huge shoulders. Though his eyes lighted at sight of Sherry, the light accentuated rather than lessened his gloom.

Brad knew. He didn't have to be told. It was written all over Fiero, his face, his walk, his clenched free hand. It was written in the way he carried the roll of white paper in the other. Just as surely as if he had been there, Brad knew what Fiero had found: the archaeology professor dead, head slumped across the scroll. The scroll? Where was it?

"So he got it, too," Brad said. "I'm—well, damned sorry, Fiero. But I told you—"

"He knew what he was doing," Fiero said. "And maybe— Maybe there's something to this, after all. Hello, Sherry."

Sherry said flatly, "Hello."

"Sit down," Brad invited.

Fiero took one of the straight chairs. "I don't say that I believe any of this," he said. "I'm inclined not to. But let's say that it's all true for the sake of this discussion. O. K.?"

"O. K. Shoot."

"If it is true, McClain, you'll want to consider your next move carefully. Will you let me tell it the way it is, and not interrupt? Then will you let me go away? I don't . . . well, I don't want to know what you're going to do about it. I'd rather be gone."

"All right. Let's have it."

"My professor," Fiero began, "got quite a bit farther in the translation than Jerrold. And here is what he learned. The Nephilim are products of angels and humans, all right. But the angels are fallen. Satanic, if you will."

As Brad gasped, Fiero raised a gigantic brown hand. "Please don't interrupt. Listen. You have evolved a theory of hybrids. Well, according to this manuscript—which, by the way, was gone."

"Gone?"

"When I found him, it was gone. Only the beginning of his translation was there on his desk, under his head. I took it. I read it. Listen."

Fiero waited while both Brad and Sherry lit cigarettes.

"According to this manuscript," Fiero continued, "the Nephilim—which translates into 'Fallen Ones' as well as 'giants'—were products of Satan's followers and human beings. Now. This is the way it stacks up, according to the records. I told you that I had searched every available source for information about giants. The sixth chapter of Genesis tells about these giants, and other records expand the story. The Lost Testament states definitely that the angels were—well, we call them devils.

"Listen. It all stacks up. Here's what was going to happen to Satan. He was bound by chains of darkness, as were his followers. I take that to mean that he and the dark angels couldn't communicate with human beings. But if they could communicate with anybody, it would be with you, McClain. You are the throwback, the father of an immortal. All right. What do they want?

"Listen. They want to live. After Armageddon, Satan and those who dropped from grace with him are to be destroyed. So if they could produce an immortal who would gain control of the world after several centuries, and they in turn controlled him, Armageddon could be postponed forever. The nations would not destroy each other. Satan, through the immortal, could gain control over mankind, which was what he wanted in the first place.

"I don't care what you think of this," Fiero said. "I'm just telling you what is there for anybody to find, if they're interested. You are the one, McClain, according to your strange dreams and experiences, that Satan has been waiting for. Maybe

it's a lot of hooey, maybe it's true. I don't care. I'm just telling what I know from research."

Nobody said anything for a few seconds. Brad and Sherry stared at the floor, the walls, the ceiling, waiting for Fiero to finish.

"Maybe you are the hybrid they want," Fiero went on. "Maybe Clare is the other. If we accept the original premise, it looks that way. Maybe all those who feel a nameless unease, nagging worries, sharp and unexplainable fears—maybe they're hybrids, too. Maybe, as you said, the feeling of aloneness in a crowd, in a room, on a hill—maybe that's another sign. If so, from what I gather, Satan has a big nucleus with which to start. I don't know. There's plenty of written evidence to back it up, if you take it at face value, which you must."

Fiero got to his feet.

"Another point, not completely finished in the translation, is that the Lost Testament apparently is an argument in favor of Satan and his followers, a justification of his acts. That's all I know. Good-by. I'm going out to Louie's."

As he went to the door, Sherry said, "I'll join you there as soon as I can." As Fiero nodded, she added, "Or look. Wait for me in the bar across the street. I might as well save cab fare."

"It's just theory," Brad said.

Fiero stopped at the door. "That's all you had," he said. "But look, I can give you a piece of evidence, and an interpretation. Fear. You told about nameless fears. Well, good heavens, man! Why wouldn't the hybrids have a heritage of fear? Satan and his followers—and that must include the hybrids—are to be destroyed after Armageddon. The fallen angels knew this. Wouldn't that knowledge be passed on to their offspring? And wouldn't the offspring be afraid? Nobody wants to be destroyed. Look. I told you I'd never felt any of those emotions. Which proves that not everybody has them. My size is probably glandular, and not angelic. But you—you know them. So do a lot of others who don't want to be destroyed." He looked at Sherry. "I'll wait for you." He went out.

Brad and Sherry were silent for a long time. Then—

"What difference does it make?" Brad demanded.

Sherry said nothing.

Joe Balaam's remarks came back to Brad, and he confiscated the gist.

"If there was an honest difference of opinion," Brad said, "if there was a war, we know only one side—the winners! Why haven't we a right to hear the other? I don't think it's fair that the idea of evil should be associated with Lucifer, without giving him a chance to defend himself. He was an angel. Is still, I suppose. Well, the only way he can get his case before man is through me, through my son. We have a right to know his side."

Sherry said nothing. She looked at Brad, unwavering.

"Stop that!" Brad snarled. "You look as if I—Well, I don't like it."

Sherry continued to stare. Brad dropped his eyes.

"It won't make any difference, in the long run," Brad said stubbornly. "Whoever is in the driver's seat has got to drive the same road. It has to be that way. So it won't do any harm if I go on through with this. It'll do good, in fact. Because Satan ought to be heard. All we know about him is in a political pamphlet. We got only one side of the question."

Sherry continued to hold her blue eyes steady on Brad, her face without expression.

"Well, say something!" he snapped, and waited.

She was silent.

"Listen, Sherry. Here it is in words of one syllable. I'm not trying to convince you. I know that. I'm trying to convince myself. All right, look. You're right, I love you. But it's much more important what happens to the race than what happens to you and me. I've got a chance to bring all the facts out in the open. I won't live to see it, neither will you. But if I can stave off—"

He stopped, remembering one of his visions, then continued passionately:

"Do you know what Armageddon is, Sherry? I was told in one of my—uh, dreams. Blood and brains knee-deep, rubbled cities, death, destruction, fire and the sound of the last trump. Look, my sweet. Millions—billions—are going to die. I can stop that. I can save all those lives."

Sherry said nothing.

"What difference does it make?" Brad demanded fiercely. "What are labels? What is good, what is evil? Evil is good, from Satan's standpoint, and good is evil. It depends on where you're sitting. Is it good to let billions die when it's unnecessary? Is it evil to save a life, a hundred lives, a billion? From my point of view, no. Oh, of course, I must admit that I have a perfectly human desire to perpetuate my name. Sure, I'd like to see the name of McClain last forever. Naturally. But, honestly, that isn't the main consideration."

He dropped his eyes before Sherry's.

"Well, it isn't," he insisted.

"Do you really believe all this?" Sherry asked.

"I've got to," Brad said hotly. "I must. Do you think I could want to marry Clare, otherwise?"

Sherry rose, and walked around the office. She didn't look at Brad. He followed her with his eyes, drinking in the slim height of her, the trimness, the orderly riot of blond hair, the shining legs, the fragile hands.

"It isn't evil," Brad insisted. "Evil is only a word, Sherry. Look, I'm a pretty good guy. You'll admit that?"

Sherry continued to pace the floor.

"Sure you will," Brad said. "You always have. If I thought that I was doing anything wrong in this, if I thought that people would suffer from my action, I'd throw it over. But I'm doing a favor to man—if this thing is true. I don't dare take a chance on disbelieving it, Sherry. All the things that have happened—they're not all coincidences. They couldn't be."

He waited for a reply, got none.

"It's like this," he said. "Take this present war. Lots of people are going to be killed. A few nations have been destroyed, and maybe others will be. But it's nothing to what Armageddon will be, Sherry."

He cast back in his mind for a description.

"Whatever has happened up to now is like kids throwing pebbles at each other, Sherry. Every war that has been fought is just a drop in the bucket of blood that Armageddon will be. It's hard to imagine its terrible portrait, Sherry. It's very hard. Well, I'm told I can stave it off. I can prevent it. Isn't that more worth while than anything I've ever done?"

Sherry still said nothing, and Brad got to his feet.

"I've got to work this thing out by myself, Sherry. I've got to decide. You're not much help. Maybe you're right. Maybe I should say the hell with it. I don't know. Good-by, darling. Maybe I won't see you any more."

He strode through the door without looking back, but from the corner of his eye he saw Sherry sit at his desk and put her head in her arms.

XV.

Mr. Boles dropped his eyes to the foot of the luminous pillar. He spoke bravely, but with a slight quaver.

"Then we are lost," he said. "I ask once again the right to act. We need not be lost. It is not too late."

Mr. Boles waited, eyes downcast, but no reply came. No movement, no sound.

"Very well," he said petulantly. "I do not question. I have never questioned. I have not always understood, but I have not questioned.

"Nor did I read the scroll on the occasions when I was ordered to prevent translation. Even on this last occasion, when a greater portion was allowed to be known, I gave not so much as a glance at the scroll or at the transcription. I wanted to read it, for I wanted to know what had happened to my brother. I wanted to know why he strayed. But it is not my place to doubt the wisdom of my ordered conduct. I obey my captain.

"Seven have I been ordered to save from their final fate. Six of these were translators, the seventh would have put McClain in prison. I assumed the guise of Jerrold when I was commanded. I have obeyed in all things.

"Therefore, my captain, it is not doubt that prompts my request. It is simply that I am afraid. I do not wish to face the tortures which the adversaries will undoubtedly devise when they win.

"For they will win. McClain will mate with her, if he is allowed to come to an undirected decision.

"This is why we have been vigilant. Always we have been warned that this condition might arise. We have been admonished to prevent it, for if Armageddon is postponed long enough for the Fallen Ones to gain control—we shall die.

"And I have been vigilant. I have not understood, but I have not questioned. I do not understand now why my complete loyalty and the loyalty of my fellow Hosts is thus rewarded with the prospect of eternal torture.

"It is not too late. McClain may yet be made to change his outlook. But if he is left to his own devices, he will marry her, and we perish. I beg permission to act. Failing this, I beg an explanation to comfort me through the coming trouble."

Mr. Boles waited once more. He did not yet lift his eyes. He stood as motionless as the pillar itself, as quiet. And still no sound, no word issued.

"Very well, my captain. Very well."

Now night had come, and as Brad wandered aimlessly, the headlights of automobiles touched his shambling figure, his bent head and dangling fists. Street lamps showed the disorder which anguished fingers had brought to his hair, and now and then a resident of one of the houses he passed stared after the young man with a face full of torture.

He had rationalized his position to Sherry, but he knew that he had spoken falsely. The position was easy to rationalize intellectually. Sure, Satan ought to have a chance. You give a murderer a chance to speak his piece. You don't say it for him, you don't put guilty words in his mouth.

No, you hear him out, and you make your decision. You want to know all the facts, too, before you pronounce a verdict.

Intellectually, it was easy. But deep down inside was a hatred of evil. Conditioning, racial memory, heritage—what was its cause? The cause was unimportant; the feeling was there. And out here in the quiet night, on this street of silent houses under faint stars—out here it was hard to be anything but emotional. Bright, artificial lights—they were for thinking; the night was made for feeling.

Clare was no longer a consideration. Small loss to let her go. But the name of McClain—that was the sticker. It could live forever. Not only McClain, but Brad, also. Brad McClain, Jr., ruler of the earth forever. And Brad McClain, Sr., would be reverenced through eternity for producing such a son.

Why hadn't he let well enough alone?—Brad asked himself. It was all so simple, at first. Find the girl and marry her. That wasn't complicated. But no, he had to get curious. He had to know about Nephilim. He had to know what was in the Lost Testament. A series of accidents had made this partly possible.

Accidents. Accidents? What difference did it make whether they were or not? Why, he asked, do people have to analyze? Like a guy on a scaffold, with a noosed neck. What satisfaction is it, what consolation, to feel that if he'd been thirty minutes earlier he'd have got away with it?

The present was here, regardless of the past through which it had evolved. The future was now to be considered. One thing was certain. He had to see Clare, no matter what he decided to do. That was the only decent thing. He'd made a bargain. He had to do something about it. Besides, she needed some comfort along about now. The first shock of her father's death was over, and that terrible early lonesomeness had probably come. He hailed a cruising cab.

She was in a long, black velvet gown with full sleeves, and a high, tight collar. Between this and her aureole of dark hair was her dead-white face. Her eyes were very wide and prominenc, filled with dignified grief and lightly misted with tears.

"It was so good of you," she said quietly. "Please sit down. No, thank you, I won't sit. I must pace. I have paced the day away."

Brad sat near the door, through which he could see into the library where Homer Windsor had died at his desk. Clare continued to move about the candle-lighted room, one slow and graceful step after another. Brad had the feeling that she was creating a conscious effect of sorrowing majesty.

"I dropped by to see if there was anything I could do," Brad said.

"Sweet," she murmured.

After a long silence, "Well?" Brad asked. "Is there?"

"No," she said, her eyes fixed on far spaces, "not here, not here."

She continued to move about the room. A resentment began to grow in Brad, resentment of what he considered theatricality. Somewhere along the line, she was putting on an act.

"I'm very sorry," he said experimentally, "about your father."

"Poor, dear papa," she said. "He died easily, though. At peace, with a clean conscience, and respected everywhere. That is my comfort. I have been able to reconcile myself to this terrible loss with that tonight."

Brad stood this attitude beside her eager disobedience of Windsor's orders yesterday, and his resentment increased.

"When is the funeral?"

"I really can't say. Other and more capable hands are taking care of the details. I must think of the future. I was devoted to papa, yes. But that is now in the past. You will bring me compensation. And soon. Soon?"

She faced him, pale hands saintly against the black column of her dress, burning eyes in her white face lit with dancing candle flames.

"Why, your father's just died," Brad said uneasily. "This doesn't seem the time nor place."

Her hands tensed, became slightly angular. "But why? We—" She was a priestess now. "We're the future."

Brad stifled his impulse to gape. She's really putting it on, he thought. Aloud, he said, "I have something to tell you."

Her hands clenched at his tone, her eyes burned brighter.

"The Nephilim," Brad blurted. "They're devils. They were fallen angels. Hybrids are part man, part devil."

The curves went out of Clare's body for a second or two. She stiffened, caught her breath, was silent.

Somewhere off in the house a clock ticked. A window shade rustled.

Then Clare relaxed, was graceful again. Quietly, she said, "Yes?"

Brad said, "Yes," emphatically, waited a couple of seconds, added, "That means—we are not going to be married."

Clare had become transfigured before Brad finished speaking. With her eyes upraised, hands loosely clasped over her breast, she murmured, almost religiously.

"We are the children of Satan."

"Didn't you hear me?" Brad snapped. "We are not going to be married."

"Our son," she went on, unheeding, "will be the Dark Prince."

"We're not going to have a son," Brad grated.

She turned her head slowly, regally, and allowed her eyes to touch on his. "We must. It was foreordained."

"Not for me," Brad said. He got to his feet. "I'm resigning."

"You can't," she said calmly, confidently. "You cannot fight your heritage. Destiny is stronger than you or I."

"Not this time, babe."

"Think," she said, in a voice of awe, "think. Here we are, the two of us. Out of all the world, we can produce a child who will never die. Think of the forces that have waited and planned that we should be together. They are strong."

"They are wrong, too, dearie."

"Ah, no," Clare breathed. "They have waited too long, planned too carefully. Even if we dared, we could not change our destiny."

Brad moved toward the door. "Just watch."

"Our blood is partly theirs," Clare said. "That part of us yearns to obey. The remainder is merely human. It cannot triumph over ourselves, and them, too. Our son," she said tenderly, "our son will be ruthless, and dark—and beautiful."

"You sound like a movie star who wants to be an actress," Brad said. "Come off it. I'm going home and take a bath."

Her words followed him down the hall, through the door, and all the way back to the office. They gnawed at his mind. They made him uneasy.

"You'll come back," she had said. "You'll come back."

Brad was almost sick at his stomach, but the sight of Ira Rafel waiting at the office door brought his mind back to the healthy business of publishing a paper, reminded him that copy had not gone to the printer, that the main front-page story was not yet written.

"Name it," Brad said, "and you can have it. I'm glad to see you."

"I was afraid you weren't coming," Ira said. "I have some juicy quotes, and if I can get to a typewriter I'll knock out the story."

They went in, and while Brad edited the last pieces of copy, Ira wrote the main story. Brad copyread it, wrote the headlines, and telephoned the print shop for a messenger. He put copy and dummy sheets into a big envelope, and stood up.

"We'll leave this with the elevator man," Brad said. "Then I think I'll go out to Louie's and get drunk."

"I'll hitch a ride, if I may," Ira said.

"Sure. But I didn't know you were a bar fly."

"I'm not. I live near there."

"Oh? That's funny. I never even asked for your address and phone number. Give 'em to Sherry in the morning, will you?"

As they drove along the road, Brad reflected that he knew very little about his reporter. He resembled the angel who appeared in Brad's visions, but beyond that he knew nothing.

Brad's thoughts were mixed in his aching head. He thought of Clare—"You'll come back." And of Joe Balaam—"Angels can assume human form." At least, that was the meaning of the cop's remark in the little room at Louie's.

Brad felt a strange compulsion. This was not like the Call. It was as though thought patterns were being traced in his mind by an outside agency. Without conscious effort, he found himself convinced that he must—must—marry the hybrid who could bear him an immortal son. He was too weak to fight this conviction which formed, apparently of itself, in his mind.

But he did fight it, remembering Clare's melodramatic posturing. He fought it with all his might, and was presently able to look at himself and his experiences with some degree of objectivity. Suddenly, he was suspicious of Rafel.

"You're an angel," Brad said, without quite knowing why he said it. The words formed in his mind, he uttered them.

After a short silence, Ira said, "Aw, shucks, mister."

"You're an angel," Brad said doggedly. "You've been shoving me around. It isn't fair."

Rafel turned his head, and an oncoming car lighted his dark, pointed face, his wide, dark eyes. "Have you lost a screw?"

"You know what I'm talking about," Brad insisted. "I'm the hybrid. I guess that's true enough. I believe it. You can force me to go through with it, and marry Clare. But I don't think it's fair. I'm just a human being, mostly. I'm no match for your kind."

"Let's begin over," Rafel suggested. "Try it again. You sound like the third act of a play, with no build-up."

"You didn't know anything about politics," Brad said. "If you'd been a reporter, like you said, you couldn't help having found out. The rudiments, at least. You dug up a yarn that nobody could have found in a million years. And the story was the one which tied me in with the Nephilim. It's all too pat, Rafel. You might as well admit it."

"I'm still lost," Ira said. "Will you try it again? You asked me once about Nephilim. What are they?"

"Don't be cagy," Brad said. "It isn't fair. I should think you'd be ashamed. You've put words in my mouth before. You put words in Joe Balaam's mouth the other day in the office. He defended Satan. He couldn't help himself. He didn't know why he was so worked up, but he was. Well, I know why. You're a fallen angel—a devil."

"Let me out here," Ira said. "I'd rather walk."

"It's no good, Rafel," Brad said. "It's no good. I know who you are. You can take off the whiskers. Well, what are you going to make me do?"

"I'm not going to make you do anything. But I'm going to clout you behind an ear if you don't let me out. You can stop now, and give me my check. I won't work for a crazy man. I've been around here long enough, anyway."

"You assumed the form of Jerrold," Brad went on stubbornly. "You made Phil Douglas disappear. Heaven knows what else. Look. It isn't too much to ask what I've got to do. I don't want to marry Clare. I won't, if I am allowed not to. But I don't know how strong I am against the forces of evil. Tell me, Rafel."

"What do I care who you marry?" Rafel flared. "I don't blame you for not wanting to marry that moron. I wouldn't have her, even in my dreams. Listen. I'm going to jump if you don't let me out."

"There's Louie's," Brad said, as the neon sign showed around a curve. "I'll stop there. Look, Rafel. If you have any compassion whatever, please tell me. Tell me if I'm right. That's a little thing to ask. I want to know. I've got to. I'll do anything you say, but tell me. If I'm psychotic, I'll be the happiest man in town. But if I'm not, I'll go through with it. Tell me!"

Rafel edged away from Brad, against the far door. "All I want is out."

"You dirty, rotten, unfair, inhuman, black fiend!"

"My!" Rafel murmured.

"I'm serving notice," Brad snarled. "You can tell your master I said to hell with the lot of you. I don't like being shoved around, I don't like being misled. You'll have to kill me, now, like you did Windsor, and the professor, and Jerrold, and the others. But I won't fall in with you, see? So kill me. Get it over with. Do it now! I've lived enough."

"Stop foaming at the mouth. Write me a check, and the hell with you, too. I don't have the faintest notion what you're raving about. Keep it up, though, and I'll swing on you."

"Go ahead!" Brad said wildly, as he pulled into the parking lot. "Go ahead! I'm not afraid of you. You nor all the other demons in hell. I've got my eyes open. You talked too much, that's all. You let me find out too much. Well, I'm not so dumb, see? Too bad for you it wasn't some numskull, instead of me, who had forever in his blood."

"Give—me—my—check!"

"O. K., and good riddance. So help me, if I ever see you again, Rafel, I'll—"

Brad broke off, and stared at Ira. Gradually his heart slowed to normal, his breathing became easier.

"Are you on the level?" he asked.

"My—check!"

"Don't all these things I've said ring a bell with you? Don't they have any significance?"

"None."

Brad stared, then said quietly, "Sorry, old man. I guess I'm plain nuts."

"I wouldn't say that. You've been working too hard. And being arrested, and all. Anybody would snap. What you need is a drink."

"Can I buy you one? I'd like you to stay on the paper."

"Thanks, no. I don't drink, and I think I'd better be drifting along. I don't like to stay in one place too long."

Brad took his checkbook from his pocket. "I'll get some money to cover this. Don't cash it until day after tomorrow. How do you want it made out?"

As he wrote the check, Brad felt shame, but he felt a curious lightness around his heart, too. Shame, because he blew his top and must have sounded insane. Lightness because he felt that the whole theory had collapsed. He had no more reason to think this than pure hunch. Rafel had seemed the one, the angel of the visions. Brad had staked his whole theory on that, for a time. He was now convinced that Rafel was what he appeared to be, a reporter. A good reporter, sure, but no more.

He gave Rafel the check, muttered an absent farewell, and went inside.

Sherry was there, and Fiero. She had her elbows on the table of a booth, a moody chin on her fists, a drink before her. She stared at Fiero across the table. Her eyes shifted to Brad as he came through the door, but she did not visibly brighten. She just stared.

"Hello," Brad said cheerfuly. "Can I buy a drink?"

"It's a free country," Sherry said.

Fiero smiled gently, and made room for Brad.

"Louie!" Brad called. "Bring another round, and keep 'em coming."

Louie left the fringe of customers at the bar and hurried over. "Yes, sir, Mr. McClain. You want something, you get it. You don't even have to pay, by golly, if you ain't got the money."

"It's a big night, Louie. I'm out to hang up a record. Where's Joe? I want to buy him a drink, too."

"He will be here pretty soon, Mr. McClain."

"Good!"

Brad smiled across at Sherry, and she returned it. But Brad's expression froze. He remembered Ira's name. In the press of emotion on the lot, when he had written the check under the dome light, Brad had made it out automatically.

I. S. Rafel. Israfel. *"None sing so wildly well as the angel Israfel."*

It was only a name, but it was too pat not to be true. He had been right, after all. Ira was an angel in his working clothes. Apparently a man, but keeping on eye on the business of the Prince of Darkness.

A great despair settled on Brad. What was the use? He was whipped. How could a mortal fight the Devil?

Then he squared his chin. A mortal could fight. He could refuse to be shoved around. With the strength of fury and revulsion at having been misinformed, he could tell them all to go back to their lairs, to go to hell. Angelic, they had called him. But not Satanic. No. They covered that up.

Suppose, he thought, suppose I throw over their scheme. What happens to me? Death? Hell fire?

I'm no hero, he thought. I'm just sore because they lied to me. I couldn't make a free choice.

If Ira is an angel, he thought. If. There's a way to prove it. If I go back to Clare, I'll never know. But if I ask Sherry to marry me, and if she says O. K., then I'll get it in the neck. I'll die, because I'm no further use to them.

If she says yes. And if Ira is an angel.

But if Ira is just a man, nothing will happen.

He looked across the table at Sherry. Her eyes became soft and blue when his smile thawed. He took her hand.

"Will you marry me? Tonight?"

Nothing happened. Brad half expected thunderbolts, and perhaps a smell of brimstone. But nothing happened.

Nothing, that is, except Fiero pounding him on the back with warm heartiness.

And nothing, too, except Sherry saying, "Of course."

XVI.

Ira Rafel came away from the christening with no expression on his dark, pointed face. He moved steadily through the sprinkle of pedestrians, and none gave him a second glance. At last he came to the cave, and entered its inner chamber.

"Brothers!" he said. "Our prince is born, and we are come to the weary beginning of the last great struggle.

"Vigilance, my brothers!"

"Guard our secret well. For mark this: *They* may mold him as well as we. *They* must not learn that he is immortal until too late.

"Let the word go out, but let it go secretly, as a little wind in the night. A prince is born.

"As we have used her called Clare, used her with cunning and as a snare, so may we use her kind, the hybrids who will hail our prince as the mightiest of men.

"We shall bring the words of the Testament to man through him. It is destroyed, but its words are burned in our hearts.

"The way has been long, but falter not. Lift up your feet, lift up your hearts. We must go on, and on, and on; and in the end we shall have won a small thing, the right to life.

"Vigilance, my brothers!"

Brad and Sherry looked down at their sleeping child.

"Gosh!" Brad whispered. "I can't get over it."

Sherry grinned. "Ain't we wonderful?"

"Look how tiny his hands are. And how perfect, with fingernails and everything."

"What do you suppose he'll be when he grows up?" Sherry mused. "A fireman? A policeman? That's what I wanted to be when I was a kid. Or will he be president, maybe?"

"If he wants to, he will. He can be anything. He's a McClain, you know."

Sherry tilted her mouth humorously. "Heaven help him," she murmured.

Brad looked at her. You wouldn't take her for a mother. She was like the Sherry whom Joe Balaam had said he'd never marry. Brad grinned. That was one time Joe had been wrong.

"Stop being the fatuous father," Sherry said. "Come on, let's feed Ira."

Brad sniffed. "Feed him burned peas, by the smell."

Sherry gasped and skittered out of the room. After another pleased look at his child, Brad went out to join Ira Rafel in the living-dining room.

Joel McClain slept, lips parted, one tiny fist against his cheek. He did not stir when the sound of his mother's voice came from the kitchen:

"Brad! Come and make the salad dressing."

Nor did the baby move in his sleep when Ira Rafel came into the room, calling back over his shoulder in a stage whisper:

"I'm going to look at your brat. I haven't seen him since the christening."

Ira made no sound as he glided to the cradle. He stood motionless, hands at his sides, and his face was without expression.

That condition changed. Ira suddenly crouched. His hands came up, clawlike, to waist level. His eyes gleamed. His lips drew back.

Mr. Boles stepped into the room, stood opposite Ira, and they looked across the cradle at each other.

"He is ours!" Ira whispered.

"Brother," Mr. Boles said softly, kindly, "I bring a message."

"I am no brother of tyrants!"

"You are defeated. Surrender, before too late."

"Defeated?" Ira said. "This is not true. The child is ours. We brought the two hybrids together."

"You were allowed to bring them together," Mr. Boles corrected. "When I was commanded to permit the marriage, I was not without doubt, and not completely without despair, but I now see the light. As you must see, and give over your evil ways, you and your fellow creatures."

Ira did not answer for a moment. Then: "I have heard much of evil. What is it?"

"You are evil. You and your kind. You corrupted man. You have brought misery and hardship on the land."

"This is not true," Ira said softly. "Surely you cannot believe it. We have nothing to do with man. He has brought hardship on himself. Here" —he pointed at Joel McClain—"is living proof that we are not evil. The child shall bring man-

kind to such a level of honor and intelligence that Armageddon cannot come and take away our lives."

"Lies will not help you now."

Ira relaxed. His hands dropped. "These are not lies," he said quietly.

"That will be decided when you surrender."

"Surrender? To tyrants?"

"But you are defeated."

"This is not true."

"It is," Mr. Boles said patiently.

Ira tensed again, and though he spoke softly so as not to waken the child, a bitter despair was in his words.

"You have come to kill him. You shall not!"

He spread protective hands once more across the cradle.

"Wait!" Mr. Boles whispered. "You could gain nothing through this immortal. Nothing."

"Only life."

"No. For know you this. He would walk in the way of righteousness."

"Which is ours," Ira said.

"No. But there is no need to speak of that." Mr. Boles waved a hand toward Joel McClain, still sleeping undisturbed. "I will speak of him, and of how he would be useless to you. Your sole purpose was to bring the Lost Testament to man through him. I do not know the words of that evil document, nor do I wish to know. But here is the message I bring. Even through an immortal who would eventually rule mankind you could not bring the words of the Lost Testament."

"Not," Ira agreed bitterly, "while tyrants with the power of life and death exist."

"Even without Divine intervention," Mr. Boles insisted, "it could not be done. Though this child is immortal, and though his intellect would be as great as ours, he is human. And man has looked on your kind as evil for so many centuries that the child would also believe it—unshakably. You could not mislead him, or trick him as you did his father—because he has full brilliance of mind. Gradually, as he gained more homage through the generations, mankind through him would turn their faces completely from you and the Lost Testament."

"If he is to die," Ira said, "all this is idle talk. But through him, we could have held off Armageddon forever."

"As could we, brother. As we can, if we are so commanded. For he is free to choose, and he will choose good. And so, whether or not Armageddon came, the Dark One and his followers would be forced to surrender."

"Never, to tyrants."

"And would you go through eternity bound by chains of darkness? Surely you would surrender and be judged, rather than face that certainty."

"We should be unbound, in the end. Even tyrants weary."

"You should not," Mr. Boles said. "For by virtue of those very chains you are defeated in the beginning. You cannot communicate with this child, as with his father. For he is like the others except for his greater mind."

Ira Rafel said nothing. Between them was the faint sound of the baby's breath, and the soft swish of his blanket as he moved his fist away from his cheek. Ira looked down at the child.

"Then kill him," he whispered. "Kill him, servant of a tyrant, so that I may take back the word."

"But there is no need," Mr. Boles said. "He shall live, and rule for us. That is the Plan. This is the word you may take back. Surrender, or remain forever bound."

Mr. Boles put a hand across the cradle, touched Ira on one shoulder. "Surrender, brother, and he shall rule for all of us."

Ira Rafel stood completely motionless for a time after Mr. Boles had gone. His dark, pointed face was blank, but he wept a little.

Then he turned toward the sound of footsteps and moved to the door as Brad appeared in it.

"Soup's on," Brad said. "Well—how do you like him now?"

"He's a fine baby," Ira said.

THE END.

JESUS SHOES

By Allan R. Bosworth

● Concerning a man who had absolute faith in what he had been told—absolute and undoubting faith—

Illustrated by Kolliker

This letter I got a couple of days ago was a long time in the mails. It was addressed to "Dr. Carl Seers, Battleship *Vermont,* United States Navy." There isn't a battleship *Vermont* any more; there never was a Dr. Carl Seers, so far as I know. The letter went to the navy department, and somebody figured out that it was meant for Chief Pharmacist's Mate Carl Seers. You see, most everybody calls a pharmacist's mate "Doc."

Then the letter followed me through two transfers from shore duty in Eleventh Naval District to my present billet in a ship which is helping survey and build our new bases in the Caribbean. The odd thing is that it caught up with me at its starting point—it had been postmarked Port au Prince in the first place. It said:

Dear Sir:

Please communicate with the undersigned relative to a request made by a navy man you may remember from long ago—one Petit Jean, deceased.

Very truly yours,

Rev. Milton Lane.

I've been in the navy nearly thirty years, and I was on my first cruise then. But I remembered, after pronouncing the name a few times. Petit Jean—Pettijohn! Parson John Pettijohn, wardroom mess attendant. Back in 1916, and aboard the old *Vermont,* sure enough. I read the letter again.

"—relative to a request . . . one Petit Jean, deceased—"

Then I was a little frightened, thinking that somebody who served with me in the sick bay of the *Vermont* must have told what happened that night nearly twenty-five years ago. I remembered the Parson's last request. I granted it because I was kidding him, like everybody else in the *Vermont* kidded him. It was his last request because it killed him—

I was remembering it all, and worrying about it, when I went ashore yesterday to look up the Rev. Mr. Lane.

The Parson shipped in New Orleans, sometime in 1915, and the *Vermont* was his first and last ship. He was only medium height, but no wider than a deck plank, and that made him look tall. He was blacker than the coal the old *Vermont* burned. And dumb! He couldn't write his own name—maybe that's how it became Pettijohn on the records.

He was a crazy sort of shine. You could see it in his eyes, especially in the way he rolled them, showing their whites, when he talked about religion. They called him "Parson" when he revealed that he'd heard "the call of the Lawd" and had joined the navy to save enough money to study for the ministry.

Right away, he became the butt of all the jokes. I guess it was because he took the joking in such a funny way—good-naturedly enough, but with a wistful, hurt sort of look. Like a child who's trusted in something that turns out to be false. That was the Parson all over—a child and trusting. If he liked you, he trusted you; if he believed in a thing, you couldn't shake his belief. He was just a simple, dumb black boy who was sure he'd "heard the call."

They sent him for buckets of steam. He stood lookout watches for mythical mail buoys. He ran all over the ship looking for cans of striped paint, plank stretchers, hammock ladders and left-handed monkey wrenches. The last time he stood a mail-buoy watch, something came floating past the bow, and the Parson fell over the side trying to reach it with his eight-foot boat hook.

That stopped the practical joking—by executive order. Because the Parson couldn't swim a stroke, and he should have been dead, by rights, before the lifeboat crew picked him up.

But he wasn't. We gave him artificial respiration in the sick bay, and he choked, and rolled the whites of his eyes and said: "Ah jes' prayed! Ah prayed, and the Lawd heah me even undah all that watah—"

We laid off, after that. We didn't see much of him for a time, except at church services. When the chaplain preached on deck, Sundays, the Parson was always listening, rolling his eyes and looking as if he were about to start shouting any minute. What was more, he could remember every word of the sermon—he couldn't read, but he could quote Scriptures for an hour.

Then he killed a man.

It was during maneuvers off Guantanamo Bay. A Filipino steward got tanked up on rum smuggled aboard from a bumboat, and pulled a knife on the Parson. If the Parson had gone to trial, I'm sure the court-martial would have acquitted him, because it was pretty plainly a case of self-defense.

But the trial never was held. The Parson's cheek was laid open—it was that close—and I had to go down to the brig every day for a week, dressing the cut. Then he got an infection, ran a temperature, and had to be brought up to the sick bay and turned in with a marine guard standing by twenty-four hours of the day.

I remember how he lay there in delirium, tossing and rolling his eyes; he babbled about the "curse of Cain" and wailed wordlessly in a queer, minor key that was enough to make anybody break out with goosepimples every time he heard it. Then he got better, but the doctor wasn't taking any chances. He ordered the Parson kept on the sick list for a while.

I was cleaning out my locker, that evening—we were en route to Puerto Rico, and I planned to make a liberty in San Juan. The Parson saw me pull out a pair of huge wooden shoes, Dutch *sabots* I had bought for a souvenir when the *Vermont* took in Amsterdam on a midshipmen's cruise.

He said, "Whut's them, Doc?"

I winked at another pharmacist's mate. "Them?" I said. "Why, they're Jesus shoes. Surely you've heard of Jesus shoes, haven't you, Parson?"

This is an old gag in the navy, and it's still used today. But the Parson was new in the outfit; he never had heard it. I explained that if a man had a pair of Jesus shoes, he could walk on water. He didn't have to wait for a shore boat when he wanted to hit the beach for a liberty.

I said: "You know, Parson. It tells in the Bible how Christ walked across the River Jordan—"

"You hadn't ought to talk like that, Doc!" he told me. "It wasn't the River Jordan. It was the Sea of Galilee. You hadn't ought to talk that way."

I winked at the marine sentry. "Well, wherever it was," I said, "these are the kind. See, they're made out of wood. You want to get yourself a pair of Jesus shoes some day, Parson."

The Parson rolled his eyes. He said, "Could I sho' enough walk on the watah with them shoes, Doc?"

"It's been done, hasn't it?" I asked him.

He nodded. And he watched me awhile, as I straightened my gear in the locker, then said: "Could I borrow them shoes sometime, Doc?"

I thought it would be fun if the Parson really took them ashore and tried walking out in the surf with them. He'd have done it, too. He liked me, and he believed anything I told him. And there wasn't room in the locker for all the gadgets I'd been accumulating.

"Tell you what, Parson," I said. "I'll give you this pair of Jesus shoes, if they'll fit you. Try 'em on!"

He did. His feet were big and flat; the *sabots* fitted him perfectly. And he was as tickled as only a darky can be.

That request to borrow those shoes was the Parson's last. Later that night, the marine went into the passageway to smoke a cigarette, and a yell from another patient brought him back on the jump. The Parson had crawled through a porthole—wearing the Jesus shoes.

The marine sounded the alarm. They dropped flares and put over two boats. They searched for an hour, without finding even one of the shoes. I kept quiet about that part of it, and so did everybody else—telling wouldn't bring the Parson back. We were twenty-odd miles from land at the time—

I remembered all this, going up a crooked, sun-blazed street toward the house where the Rev. Milton Lane lived. After nearly twenty-five years, somebody *had* told. Not the marine, because he died in Belleau Wood. And that other pharmacist's mate left the service after one cruise. I thought it must have been the patient who sat up and yelled; I have forgotten his name.

I thought, "Well, it's caught up with me!" And I knocked on the door.

The Rev. Milton Lane was a big man in a white linen suit. He didn't look like a preacher. And he was young—he couldn't have been much over twenty-five. He showed me to a cool terrace that overlooked the sea, and I introduced myself and told him I'd come about Pettijohn.

"Oh, Petit Jean!" he said. "I didn't connect the name. You're Dr. Seers—you took care of him when he had that cut on his cheek!"

I explained that I wasn't a doctor, but he didn't seem to hear. He stepped to the door and said something to a servant. I thought maybe he was sending for the police.

Then he came back and said: "His last request was very strange. I didn't explain it in my letter, because—"

"I know," I said. "It's been a long time. But I remember. The trouble was, the Parson—Pettijohn, I mean—believed anything you told him. He didn't know he was being kidded. He actually thought he could walk on water!"

"Say that again," Rev. Lane said.

I told him. I told him everything that happened after the Parson came to the *Vermont*, so he'd be more likely to understand what happened that night.

He shook his head. "And I never really believed him!" he said, as if he were talking to himself. "I didn't understand the request he made before he died, last year. I—"

"Last year?"

The servant came out before he spoke. Rev. Lane said: "Yes—Petit Jean died last year. For more than twenty years he was a preacher here in Haiti—he was more than that to the superstitious natives. He told them he had walked across the sea to bring them the word of God. And his last request was that I find you and send you these."

He was unwrapping the package the servant brought. I knew, even before I looked, that the package held a pair of wooden shoes.

THE END.

MAD

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UN—5D

THE COMPLEAT WEREWOLF

By Anthony Boucher

● It would, of course, take a famous detective story author to appreciate the full possibilities of lycanthropy—

Illustrated by M. Isip

Author's note: In my criminological researches, I have occasionally come across references to an agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation who bids fair to become as great a figure of American legend as Paul Bunyan or John Henry. This man is invulnerable to bullets. He strikes such terror into criminals as to drive them to suicide or madness. He sometimes vanishes from human ken entirely, and at other times he is reported to have appeared with equal suddenness stark naked. And perhaps the most curious touch of all, he engages in a never-ceasing quest, of Arthurian intensity, for someone who can perform the Indian rope trick.

Only recently, after intensive probings in Berkeley, where I have certain fortunate connections particularly with the department of German, and a few grudging confidences from my old friend Fergus O'Breen, have I been able to piece together the facts behind this legend.

Here, then, is the story, with only one important detail suppressed, and that, I assure you, strictly for your own good.

The professor glanced at the note:

Don't be silly—Gloria.

Wolfe Wolf crumpled the sheet of paper into a yellow ball and hurled it out the window into the sunshine of the bright campus spring. He made several choice and profane remarks in fluent Middle High German.

Emily looked up from typing the proposed budget for the departmental library. "I'm afraid I didn't understand that, Professor Wolf. I'm weak on Middle High."

"Just improvising," said Wolf, and sent a copy of the "Journal of English and Germanic Philology" to follow the telegram.

Emily rose from the typewriter. "There's something the matter. Did the committee reject your monograph on Hager?"

"That monumental contribution to human knowledge? Oh, no. Nothing so important as that."

"But you're so upset—"

"The office wife!" Wolf snorted. "And pretty damned polyandrous at that, with the whole department on your hands. Go way."

Emily's dark little face lit up with a flame of righteous anger that removed any trace of plainness. "Don't talk to me like that, Mr. Wolf. I'm simply trying to help you. And it isn't the whole department. It's—"

Professor Wolf picked up an inkwell, looked after the telegram and the "Journal," then set the glass pot down again. "No. There are better ways of going to pieces. Sorrows drown easier than they smash— Get Herbrecht to take my two o'clock, will you?"

"Where are you going?"

"To hell in sectors. So long."

"Wait. Maybe I can help you. Remember when the dean jumped you for serving drinks to students? Maybe I can—"

Wolf stood in the doorway and extended one arm impressively, pointing with that curious index which was as long as the middle finger. "Madam, academically you are indispensable. You are the prop and stay of the existence of this department. But at the moment this department can go to hell, where it will doubtless continue to need your invaluable services."

"But don't you see—" Emily's voice shock. "No. Of course not. You wouldn't see. You're just a man—no, not even a man. You're just Professor Wolf. You're Woof-woof."

Wolf staggered. "I'm what?"

"Woof-woof. That's what everybody calls you because your name's Wolfe Wolf. All your students, everybody. But you wouldn't notice a thing like that. Oh, no. Woof-woof, that's what you are."

"This," said Wolfe Wolf, "is the crowning blow. My heart is breaking, my world is shattered, I've got to walk a mile from the campus to find a bar; but all this isn't enough. I've got to be called Woof-woof. Good-by!"

He turned, and in the doorway caromed into a vast and yielding bulk, which gave out with a noise that might have been either a greeting of

Professor Wolf realized a certain difficulty; he knew the word that would change him back, but, unfortunately, it wasn't one a wolf's vocal cords could say—

"Wolf!" or more probably an inevitable grunt of "Oof!"

Wolf backed into the room and admitted Professor Fearing, paunch, pince-nez, cane and all. The older man waddled over to his desk, plumped himself down, and exhaled a long breath. "My dear boy," he gasped. "Such impetuosity."

"Sorry, Oscar."

"Ah, youth—" Professor Fearing fumbled about for a handkerchief, found none, and proceeded to polish his pince-nez on his somewhat stringy necktie. "But why such haste to depart? And why is Emily crying?"

"Is she?"

"You see?" said Emily hopelessly, and muttered "Woof-woof" into her damp handkerchief.

"And why do copies of the JEGP fly about my head as I harmlessly cross the campus? Do we have teleportation on our hands?"

"Sorry," Wolf repeated curtly. "Temper.

Couldn't stand that ridiculous argument of Glocke's. Good-by."

"One moment." Professor Fearing fished into one of his unnumbered handkerchiefless pockets and produced a sheet of yellow paper. "I believe this is yours?"

Wolf snatched at it and quickly converted it into confetti.

Fearing chuckled. "How well I remember when Gloria was a student here! I was thinking of it only last night when I saw her in 'Moonbeams and Melody.' How she did upset this whole department! Heavens, my boy, if I'd been a younger man myself—"

"I'm going. You'll see about Herbrecht, Emily?"

Emily sniffled and nodded.

"Come, Wolfe." Fearing's voice had grown more serious. "I didn't mean to plague you. But you mustn't take these things too hard. There are better ways of finding consolation than in losing your temper or getting drunk."

"Who said anything about—"

"Did you need to say it? No, my boy, if you were to— You're not a religious man, are you?"

"Good God, no," said Wolf contradictorily.

"If only you were— If I might make a suggestion, Wolf, why don't you come over to the Temple tonight? We're having very special services. They might take your mind off Glo— off your troubles."

"Thanks, no. I've always meant to visit your Temple—I've heard the damnedest rumors about it—but not tonight. Some other time."

"Tonight would be especially interesting."

"Why? What's so special of a feast day about April 30th?"

Fearing shook his gray head. "It is shocking how ignorant a scholar can be outside of his chosen field— But you know the place, Wolfe; I'll hope to see you there tonight."

"Thanks. But my troubles don't need any supernatural solutions. A couple of zombies will do nicely, and I do *not* mean serviceable stiffs. Goodby, Oscar." He was halfway through the door before he added as an afterthought, " 'By, Emily."

"Such rashness," Fearing murmured. "Such impetuosity. Youth is a wonderful thing to enjoy, is it not, Emily?"

Emily said nothing, but plunged into typing the proposed budget as though all the fiends of hell were after her, as indeed many of them were.

The sun was setting, and Wolf's tragic account of his troubles had laid an egg, too. The bartender had polished every glass in the joint and still the repetitive tale kept pouring forth. He was torn between a boredom new even in his experience and a professional admiration for a customer who could consume zombies indefinitely.

"Did I tell you about the time she flunked the mid term?" Wolf demanded truculently.

"Only three times," said the bartender.

"All right, then; I'll tell you. Yunnerstand, I don't do things like this. Profeshical ethons, that's what's I've got. But this was different. This wasn't like somebody that doesn't know just because she doesn't know; this was a girl that didn't know because she wasn't the kind of girl that has to know the kind of things a girl has to know if she's the kind of girl that ought to know that kind of things. Yunnerstand?"

The bartender cast a calculating glance at the plump little man who sat alone at the end of the deserted bar, carefully nursing his gin-and-tonic.

"She made me see that. She made me see lossa things and I can still see the things she made me see the things. It wasn't just like a professor falls for a coed, yunnerstand? This was different. This was wunnaful. This was like a whole new life like."

The bartender sidled down to the end of the bar. "Brother," he whispered softly.

The little man with the odd beard looked up from his gin-and-tonic. "Yes, colleague?"

"If I listen to that potted professor another five minutes, I'm going to start smashing up the joint. How's about slipping down there and standing in for me, huh?"

The little man looked Wolf over and fixed his gaze especially on the hand that clenched the tall zombie glass. "Gladly, colleague," he nodded.

The bartender sighed a gust of relief.

"She was Youth," Wolf was saying intently to where the bartender had stood. "But it wasn't just that. This was different. She was Life and Excitement and Joy and Ecstasy and Stuff. Yunner—" He broke off and stared at the empty space. "*Uh*-mazing!" he observed. "Right before my very eyes. *Uh*-mazing!"

"You were saying, colleague?" the plump little man prompted from the adjacent stool.

Wolf turned. "So there you are. Did I tell you about the time I went to her house to check her term paper?"

"No. But I have a feeling you will."

"Howja know? Well, this night—"

The little man drank slowly; but his glass was empty by the time Wolf had finished the account of an evening of pointlessly tentative flirtation. Other customers were drifting in, and the bar was now about a third full.

"—and ever since then—" Wolf broke off sharply. "That isn't you," he objected.

"I think it is, colleague."

"But you're a bartender and *you* aren't a bartender."

"No. I'm a magician."

"Oh. That explains it. Now like I was telling you— Hey! Your bald is beard."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your bald is beard. Just like your head. It's all jussa fringe running around."

"I like it that way."

"And your glass is empty."

"That's all right, too."

"Oh, no, it isn't. It isn't every night you get to drink with a man that proposed to Gloria Garton and got turned down. This is an occasion for celebration." Wolf thumped loudly on the bar and held up his first two fingers.

The little man regarded their equal length. "No," he said softly. "I think I'd better not. I know my capacity. If I have another—well, things might start happening."

"Lettemappen!"

"No. Please, colleague. I'd rather—"

The bartender brought the drinks. "Go on, brother," he whispered. "Keep him quiet. I'll do you a favor sometime."

Reluctantly the little man sipped at his fresh gin-and-tonic.

The professor took a gulp of his *n*th zombie. "My name's Woof-woof," he proclaimed. "Lots of people call me Wolfe Wolf. They think that's funny. But it's really Woof-woof. Wazoors?"

The other paused a moment to decipher that Arabic-sounding word, then said, "Mine's Ozymandias the Great."

"That's a funny name."

"I told you I'm a magician. Only I haven't worked for a long time. Theatrical managers are peculiar, colleague. They don't want a real magician. They won't even let me show 'em my best stuff. Why, I remember one night in Darjeeling—"

"Glad to meet you, Mr. . . . Mr.—"

"You can call me Ozzy. Most people do."

"Glad to meet you, Ozzy. Now about this girl. This Gloria. Yunnerstand, donya?"

"Sure, colleague."

"She thinks being a professor of German is nothing. She wants something glamorous. She says if I was an actor now or a G-man— Yunnerstand?"

Ozymandias the Great nodded.

"Awright, then! So yunnerstand. Fine. But whatddayou want to keep talking about it for? Yunnerstand. That's that. To hell with it."

Ozymandias' round and fringed face brightened. "Sure," he said, and added recklessly, "Let's drink to that."

They clinked glasses and drank. Wolf carelessly tossed off a toast in Old Low Frankish, with an unpardonable error in the use of the genitive.

The two men next to them began singing "My Wild Irish Rose," but trailed off disconsolately. "What we need," said the one with the derby, "is a tenor."

"What I need," Wolf muttered, "is a cigarette."

"Sure," said Ozymandias the Great. The bartender was drawing beer directly in front of them. Ozymandias reached across the bar, removed a lighted cigarette from the barkeep's ear, and handed it to his companion.

"Where'd that come from?"

"I don't quite know. All I know is how to get them. I told you I was a magician."

"Oh. I see. Pressajijijation."

"No. Not a prestidigitator; I said a magician. Oh, blast it! I've done it again. More than one gin-and-tonic and I start showing off."

"I don't believe you," said Wolf flatly. "No such thing as magicians. That's just as silly as Oscar Fearing and his Temple and what's so special about April 30th, anyway?"

The bearded man frowned. "Please, colleague. Let's forget it."

"No. I don't believe you. You pressajijijated that cigarette. You didn't magic it." His voice began to rise. "You're a fake."

"Please, brother," the barkeep whispered. "Keep him quiet."

"All right," said Ozymandias wearily. "I'll show you something that can't be prestidigitation." The couple adjoining had begun to sing again. "They need a tenor. All right; listen!"

And the sweetest, most ineffably Irish tenor ever heard joined in on the duet. The singers didn't worry about the source; they simply accepted the new voice gladly and were spurred on to their very best, with the result that the bar knew the finest harmony it had heard since the night the Glee Club was suspended en masse.

Wolf looked impressed, but shook his head. "That's not magic, either. That's ventrocolism."

"As a matter of strict fact, that was a street singer who was killed in the Easter Rebellion. Fine fellow, too; never heard a better voice unless it was that night in Darjeeling when—"

"Fake!" said Wolfe Wolf loudly and belligerently.

Ozymandias once more contemplated that long index finger. He looked at the professor's dark brows that met in a straight line over his nose. He picked his companion's limpish hand off the bar and scrutinized the palm. The growth of hair was not marked, but it was perceptible.

The magician chortled. "And you sneer at magic!"

"Whasso funny about me sneering at magic?"

Ozymandias lowered his voice. "Because, my fine furry friend, you are a werewolf."

The Irish martyr had begun "Rose of Tralee" and the two mortals were joining in valiantly.

"I'm what?"

"A werewolf."

"But there isn't any such thing. Any fool knows that."

"Fools," said Ozymandias, "know a great deal which the wise do not. There are werewolves.

There always have been, and quite probably always will be." He spoke as calmly and assuredly as though he were mentioning that the earth was round. "And there are three infallible physical signs; the meeting eyebrows, the long index finger, the hairy palms. You have all three. And even your name is an indication. Family names do not come from nowhere. Every Smith has an ancestor somewhere who was a Smith. Every Fisher comes from a family that once fished. And your name is Wolf."

The statement was so quiet, so plausible, that Wolf faltered. "But a werewolf is a man that changes into a wolf. I've never done that. Honest I haven't."

"A mammal," said Ozymandias, "is an animal that bears its young alive and suckles them. A virgin is nonetheless a mammal. Because you have never changed does not make you any the less a werewolf."

"But a werewolf—" Suddenly Wolf's eyes lit up. "A werewolf! But that's even better than a G-man! Now I can show Gloria!"

"What on earth do you mean, colleague?"

Wolf was climbing down from his stool. The intense excitement of this brilliant new idea seemed to have sobered him. He grabbed the little man by the sleeve. "Come on. We're going to find a nice quiet place. And you're going to prove you're a magician."

"But how?"

"You're going to show me how to change!"

Ozymandias finished his gin-and-tonic, and with it drowned his last regretful hesitation. "Colleague," he announced, "you're on!"

Professor Oscar Fearing, standing behind the curiously carved lectern of the Temple of the Dark Truth, concluded the reading of the prayer with mumbling sonority. "And on this night of all nights, in the name of the black light that glows in the darkness, we give thanks!" He closed the parchment-bound book and faced the small congregation, calling out with fierce intensity, "Who wishes to give his thanks to the Lower Lord?"

A cushioned dowager rose. "I give thanks!" she shrilled excitedly. "My Ming Choy was sick, even unto death. I took of her blood and offered it to the Lower Lord, and he had mercy and restored her to me!"

Behind the altar an electrician checked his switches and spat disgustedly. "Bugs! Every last one of 'em!"

The man who was struggling into a grotesque and horrible costume paused and shrugged. "They pay good money. What's it to us if they're bugs?"

A tall, thin, old man had risen uncertainly to his feet. "I give thanks!" he cried. "I give thanks to the Lower Lord that I have finished my great work. My protective screen against magnetic bombs is a tried and proven success, to the glory of our country and science and the Lord."

"Crackpot," the electrician muttered.

The man in costume peered around the altar. "Crackpot, hell! That's Chiswick from the physics department. Think of a man like that falling for this stuff! And listen to him: He's even telling about the government's plans for installation. You know, I'll bet you one of these fifth columnists could pick up something around here."

There was silence in the Temple when the congregation had finished its thanksgiving. Professor Fearing leaned over the lectern and spoke quietly and impressively. "As you know, brothers in Darkness, tonight is May Eve, the 30th of April, the night consecrated by the Church to that martyr missionary St. Walpurgis, and by us to other and deeper purposes. It is on this night, and this night only, that we may directly give our thanks to the Lower Lord himself. Not in wanton orgy and obscenity, as the Middle Ages misconceived his desires, but in praise and in the deep, dark joy that issues forth from Blackness."

"Hold your hats, boys," said the man in the costume. "Here I go again."

"Eka!" Fearing thundered. *"Dva tri chatur! Pancha! Shas sapta! Ashta nava dasha ekadasha!"* He paused. There was always the danger that at this moment some scholar in this university town might recognize that the invocation, though perfect Sanskrit, consisted solely of the numbers from one to eleven. But no one stirred, and he launched forth in more apposite Latin: *"Per vota nostra ipse nunc surgat nobis dicatus Baal Zebub!"*

"Baal Zebub!" the congregation chorused.

"Cue," said the electrician, and pulled a switch.

The lights flickered and went out. Lightning played across the sanctuary. Suddenly out of the darkness came a sharp bark, a yelp of pain, and a long-drawn howl of triumph.

A blue light now began to glow dimly. In the faint reflection of this, the electrician was amazed to see his costumed friend at his side, nursing his bleeding hand.

"What the hell—" the electrician whispered.

"Hanged if I know. I go out there on cue, all ready to make my terrifying appearance, and what happens? Great big hell of a dog up and nips my hand. Why didn't they tell me they'd switched the script?"

In the glow of the blue light the congregation reverently contemplated the plump little man with the fringe of beard and the splendid gray wolf that stood beside him. "Hail, O Lower Lord!" resounded the chorus, drowning out one spinster's murmur of "Bu my *dear,* I *swear* he was *much* handsomer last year."

"Colleagues!" said Ozymandias the Great, and there was utter silence, a dread hush awaiting the momentous words of the Lower Lord. Ozy-

mandias took one step forward, placed his tongue carefully between his lips, uttered the ripest, juiciest raspberry of his career, and vanished, wolf and all.

Wolfe Wolf opened his eyes and shut them again hastily. He had never expected the quiet and sedate Berkeley Inn to install centrifugal rooms. It wasn't fair. He lay in darkness, waiting for the whirling to stop and trying to reconstruct the past night.

He remembered the bar all right, and the zombies. And the bartender. Very sympathetic chap that, up until he suddenly changed into a little man with a fringe of beard. That was where things began getting strange. There was something about a cigarette and an Irish tenor and a werewolf. Fantastic idea, that. Any fool knows—

Wolf sat up suddenly. He *was* the werewolf. He threw back the bedclothes and stared down at his legs. Then he sighed relief. They were long legs. They were hairy enough. They were brown from much tennis. But they were indisputably human.

He got up, resolutely stifling his qualms, and began to pick up the clothing that was scattered nonchalantly about the floor. A crew of gnomes was excavating his skull, but he hoped they might go away if he didn't pay too much attention to them. One thing was certain; he was going to be good from now on. Gloria or no Gloria, heartbreak or no heartbreak, drowning your sorrows wasn't good enough. If you felt like this and could imagine you'd been a werewolf—

But why should he have imagined it in such detail? So many fragmentary memories seemed to come back as he dressed. Going up Strawberry Canyon with the fringed beard, finding a desolate and isolated spot for magic, learning the words—

Hell, he could even remember the words. The word that changed you and the one that changed you back.

Had he made up those words, too, in his drunken imaginings? And had he made up what he could only barely recall—the wonderful, magical freedom of changing, the single, sharp pang of alteration and then the boundless happiness of being lithe and fleet and free?

He surveyed himself in the mirror. He looked exactly what he was, save for the unwonted wrinkles in his conservative single-breasted gray suit: a quiet academician, a little better built, a little more impulsive, a little more romantic than most, perhaps, but still just that—Professor Wolf.

The rest was nonsense. But there was, that impulsive side of him suggested, only one way of proving the fact. And that was to say The Word.

"All right," said Wolfe Wolf to his reflection. "I'll show you." And he said it.

The pang was sharper and stronger than he'd remembered. Alcohol numbs you to pain. It tore him for a moment with an anguish like the descriptions of childbirth. Then it was gone, and he flexed his limbs in happy amazement. But he was not a lithe, fleet, free beast. He was a helplessly trapped wolf, irrevocably entangled in a conservative, single-breasted gray suit.

He tried to rise and walk, but the long sleeves and legs tripped him over flat on his muzzle. He kicked with his paws, trying to tear his way out, and then stopped. Werewolf or no werewolf, he was likewise still Professor Wolf, and this suit had cost thirty-five dollars. There must be some cheaper way of securing freedom than tearing the suit to shreds.

He used several good, round, Low German expletives. This was a complication that wasn't in any of the werewolf legends he'd ever read. There, people just—boom!—became wolves or—bang!—became men again. When they were men, they wore clothes; when they were wolves, they wore fur. Just like Hyperman becoming Bark Lent again on top of the Empire State Building and finding his street clothes right there. Most misleading. He began to remember now how Ozymandias the Great had made him strip before teaching him the words—

The words! That was it. All he had to do was say the word that changed you back—*Absarka!*—and he'd be a man again, comfortably fitted inside his suit. Then he could strip and play what games he wished. You see? Reason solves all. *"Absarka!"* he said.

Or thought he said. He went through all the proper mental processes for saying *Absarka!* but all that came out of his muzzle was a sort of clicking whine. And he was still a conservatively dressed and helpless wolf.

This was worse than the clothes problem. If he could be released only by saying *Absarka!* and if, being a wolf, he could say nothing, why, there he was. Indefinitely. He could go find Ozzy and ask —but how could a wolf wrapped up in a gray suit get safely out of a hotel and set out hunting for an unknown address?

He was trapped. He was lost. He was—

"Absarka!"

Professor Wolfe Wolf stood up in his grievously rumpled gray suit and beamed on the beard-fringed face of Ozymandias the Great.

"You see, colleague," the little magician explained, "I figured you'd want to try it again as soon as you got up, and I knew darned well you'd have your troubles. Thought I'd come over and straighten things out for you."

Wolf lit a cigarette in silence and handed the pack to Ozymandias. "When you came in just now," he said at last, "what did you see?"

"You as a wolf."

"Then it really— I actually—"

"Sure. You're a full-fledged werewolf, all right."

Wolf sat down on the rumpled bed. "I guess," he ventured slowly, "I've got to believe it. And if I believe that— But it means I've got to believe everything I've always scorned. I've got to believe in gods and devils and hells and—"

"You needn't be so pluralistic. But there is a God." Ozymandias said this as calmly and convincingly as he had stated last night that there were werewolves.

"And if there's a God, then I've got a soul?"

"Sure."

"And if I'm a werewolf— Hey!"

"What's the trouble, colleague?"

"All right, Ozzy. You know everything. Tell me this: Am I damned?"

"For what? Just for being a werewolf? Shucks, no; let me explain. There's two kinds of werewolves. There's the cursed kind that can't help themselves, that just go turning into wolves without any say in the matter; and there's the voluntary kind like you. Now most of the voluntary kind are damned, sure, because they're wicked men who lust for blood and eat innocent people. But they aren't damnably wicked because they're werewolves; they became werewolves because they are damnably wicked. Now you changed yourself just for the hell of it and because it looked like a good way to impress a gal; that's an innocent-enough motive, and being a werewolf doesn't make it any less so. Werewolves don't have to be monsters; it's just that we only hear about the ones that are."

"But how can I be voluntary when you told me I was a werewolf before ever I changed?"

"Not everybody can change. It's like being able to roll your tongue or wiggle your ears. You can, or you can't; and that's that. And, like those abilities, there's probably a genetic factor involved, though nobody's done any serious research on it. You were a werewolf *in posse;* now you're one *in esse.*"

"Then it's all right? I can be a werewolf just for having fun, and it's safe?"

"Absolutely."

Wolf chortled. "Will I show Gloria! Dull and unglamorous, indeed! Anybody can marry an actor or a G-man; but a werewolf—"

"Your children probably will be, too," said Ozymandias cheerfully.

Wolf shut his eyes dreamily, then opened them with a start. "You know what?"

"What?"

"I haven't got a hangover any more! This is marvelous. This is— Why, this is practical. At last the perfect hangover cure. Shuffle yourself into a wolf and back and— Oh, that reminds me. How do I get back?"

"*Absarka.*"

"I know. But when I'm a wolf I can't say it."

"That," said Ozymandias sadly, "is the curse of being a white magician. You keep having to use the second-best form of spells, because the best would be black. Sure, a black-magic werebeast can turn himself back whenever he wants to. I remember in Darjeeling—"

"But how about me?"

"That's the trouble. You have to have somebody to say *Absarka!* for you. That's what I did last night, or do you remember? After we broke up the party at your friend's Temple— Tell you what. I'm retired now, and I've got enough to live on modestly because I can always magic up a little— Are you going to take up werewolfing seriously?"

"For a while, anyway. Till I get Gloria."

"Then why shouldn't I come and live here in your hotel? Then I'll always be handy to *Absarka* you. After you get the girl, you can teach her."

Wolf extended his hand. "Noble of you. Shake." And then his eye caught his wrist watch. "Good Lord! I've missed two classes this morning. Werewolfing's all very well, but a man's got to work for his living."

"Most men." Ozymandias calmly reached his hand into the air and plucked a coin. He looked at it ruefully; it was a gold moidore. "Hang these spirits; I simply cannot explain to them about gold being illegal."

"From Los Angeles," Wolf thought, with the habitual contempt of the northern Californian, as he surveyed the careless sport coat and the bright-yellow shirt of his visitor.

This young man rose politely as the professor entered the office. His green eyes gleamed cordially and his red hair glowed in the spring sunlight. "Professor Wolf?" he asked.

Wolf glanced impatiently at his desk. "Yes."

"O'Breen's the name. I'd like to talk to you a minute."

"My office hours are from three to four Tuesdays and Thursdays. I'm afraid I'm rather busy now."

"This isn't faculty business. And it's important." The young man's attitude was affable and casual, but he managed none the less to convey a sense of urgency that piqued Wolf's curiosity. The all-important letter to Gloria had waited while he took two classes; it could wait another five minutes.

"Very well, Mr. O'Breen."

"And alone, if you please."

Wolf himself hadn't noticed that Emily was in the room. He now turned to the secretary and said, "All right. If you don't mind, Emily—"

Emily shrugged and went out.

"Now, sir. What is this important and secret business?"

"Just a question or two. To start with, how well do you know Gloria Garton?"

Wolf paused. You could hardly say, "Young man, I am about to repropose to her in view of my becoming a werewolf." Instead he simply said—the truth if not the whole truth—"She was a pupil of mine a few years ago."

"I said *do*, not *did*. How well do you know her now?"

"And why should I bother to answer such a question?"

The young man handed over a card. Wolf read:

FERGUS O'BREEN

Private Inquiry Agent

Licensed by the State of California

Wolf smiled. "And what does this mean? Divorce evidence? Isn't that the usual field of private inquiry agents?"

"Miss Garton isn't married, as you probably know very well. I'm just asking if you've been in touch with her much lately?"

"And I'm simply asking why you should want to know?"

O'Breen rose and began to pace around the office. "We don't seem to be getting very far, do we? I'm to take it that you refuse to state the nature of your relations with Gloria Garton?"

"I see no reason why I should do otherwise." Wolf was beginning to be annoyed.

To his surprise, the detective relaxed into a broad grin. "O. K. Let it ride. Tell me about your department: How long have the various faculty members been here?"

"Instructors and all?"

"Just the professors."

"I've been here for seven years. All the others at least a good ten, probably more. If you want exact figures, you can probably get them from the dean, unless, as I hope"—Wolf smiled cordially—"he throws you out flat on your red pate."

O'Breen laughed. "Professor, I think we could get on. One more question, and you can do some pate-tossing yourself. Are you an American citizen?"

"Of course."

"And the rest of the department?"

"All of them. And now would you have the common decency to give me some explanation of this fantastic farrago of questions?"

"No," said O'Breen casually. "Good-by, professor." His alert, green eyes had been roaming about the room, sharply noticing everything. Now, as he left, they rested on Wolf's long index finger,

moved up to his heavy meeting eyebrows, and returned to the finger. There was a suspicion of a startled realization in those eyes as he left the office.

But that was nonsense, Wolf told himself. A private detective, no matter how shrewd his eyes, no matter how apparently meaningless his inquiries, would surely be the last man on earth to notice the signs of lycanthropy.

Funny. Werewolf was a word you could accept. You could say, "I am a werewolf," and it was all right. But say "I am a lycanthrope," and your flesh crawled. Odd. Possibly material for a paper on the influence of etymology on connotation for one of the learned periodicals.

But, hell! Wolfe Wolf was no longer primarily a scholar. He was a werewolf now, a white-magic werewolf, a werewolf-for-fun; and fun he was going to have. He lit his pipe, stared at the blank paper on his desk, and tried desperately to draft a letter to Gloria. It should hint at just enough to fascinate her and hold her interest until he could go south when the term ended and reveal to her the whole wonderful new truth. It—

Professor Oscar Fearing grunted his ponderous way into the office. "Good afternoon, Wolf. Hard at it, my boy?"

"Afternoon," Wolf replied distractedly, and continued to stare at the paper.

"Great events coming, eh? Are you looking forward to seeing the glorious Gloria?"

Wolf started. "How— What do you mean?"

Fearing handed him a folded newspaper. "You hadn't heard?"

Wolf read with growing amazement and delight:

GLORIA GARTON TO ARRIVE FRIDAY

Local Girl Returns to Berkeley

As part of the most spectacular talent hunt since the search for Scarlett O'Hara, Gloria Garton, glamorous Metropolis starlet, will visit Berkeley Friday.

Friday afternoon at the Campus Theater, Berkeley canines will have their chance to compete in the nation-wide quest for a dog to play Tookah the wolf dog in the great Metropolis epic, "Fangs of the Forest," and Gloria Garton herself will be present at the auditions.

"I owe so much to Berkeley," Miss Garton said. "It will mean as much to me to see the campus and the city again." Miss Garton has the starring human role in "Fangs of the Forest."

Miss Garton was a student at the University of California when she received her first chance in films. She is a member of Mask and Dagger, honorary dramatic society, and Rho Rho Rho Sorority.

Wolfe Wolf glowed. This was perfect. No need now to wait till term was over. He could see Gloria now and claim her in all his wolfish vigor. Friday—today was Wednesday—that gave him two nights to practice and perfect the technique of werewolfry. And then—

He noticed the dejected look on the older professor's face, and a small remorse smote him. "How did things go last night, Oscar?" he asked sympathetically. "How was your big Walpurgis night services?"

Fearing regarded him oddly. "You know that now? Yesterday April 30th meant nothing to you."

"I got curious and looked it up. But how did it go?"

"Well enough," Fearing lied feebly. "Do you know, Wolf," he demanded after a moment's silence, "what is the real curse of every man interested in the occult?"

"No. What?"

"That true power is never enough. Enough for yourself, perhaps, but never enough for others. So that no matter what your true abilities, you must forge on beyond them into charlatanry to convince the others. Look at St. Germain. Look at Francis Stuart. Look at Cagliostro. But the worst tragedy is the next stage; when you realize that your powers were greater than you supposed and that the charlatanry was needless. When you realize that you have no notion of the extent of your powers. Then—"

"Then, Oscar?"

"Then, my boy, you are a badly frightened man."

Wolf wanted to say something consoling. He wanted to say, "Look, Oscar. It was just me. Go back to your half-hearted charlatanry and be happy." But he couldn't do that. Only Ozzy could know the truth of that splendid gray wolf. Only Ozzy and Gloria.

The moon was bright on that hidden spot in the canyon. The night was still. And Wolfe Wolf had a severe case of stage fright. Now that it came to the real thing—for this morning's clothes-complicated fiasco hardly counted and last night he could not truly remember—he was afraid to plunge cleanly into wolfdom and anxious to stall and talk as long as possible.

"Do you think," he asked the magician nervously, "that I could teach Gloria to change, too?"

Ozymandias pondered. "Maybe, colleague. It'd depend. She might have the natural ability, and she might not. And, of course, there's no telling what she might change into."

"You mean she wouldn't necessarily be a wolf?"

"Of course not. The people who can change, change into all sorts of things. And every folk knows best the kind that most interests it. We've got an English and Central European tradition; so we know mostly about werewolves. But take Scandinavia, and you'll hear chiefly about were-bears, only they call 'em berserkers. And Orientals, now, they're apt to know about weretigers. Trou-

ble is, we've thought so much about were*wolves* that that's all we know the signs for; I wouldn't know how to spot a weretiger just offhand."

"Then there's no telling what might happen if I taught her The Word?"

"Not the least. Of course, there's some were-things that just aren't much use being. Take like being a wereant. You change and somebody steps on you and that's that. Or like a fella I knew once in Madagascar. Taught him The Word, and know what? Hanged if he wasn't a werediplodocus. Shattered the whole house into little pieces when he changed and damned near trampled me under hoof before I could say *Absarka!* He decided not to make a career of it. Or then there was that time in Darjeeling— But, look, colleague, are you going to stand around here naked all night?"

"No," said Wolf. "I'm going to change now. You'll take my clothes back to the hotel?"

"Sure. They'll be there for you. And I've put a very small spell on the night clerk, just enough for him not to notice wolves wandering in. Oh, and by the way—anything missing from your room?"

"Not that I noticed. Why?"

"Because I thought I saw somebody come out of it this afternoon. Couldn't be sure, but I think he came from there. Young fella with red hair and Hollywood clothes."

Wolfe Wolf frowned. That didn't make sense. Pointless questions from a detective were bad enough, but searching your hotel room— But what were detectives to a full-fledged werewolf? He grinned, nodded a friendly good-by to Ozymandias the Great, and said The Word.

The pain wasn't so sharp as this morning, though still quite bad enough. But it passed almost at once, and his whole body filled with a sense of limitless freedom. He lifted his snout and sniffed deep at the keen freshness of this night air. A whole new realm of pleasure opened up for him through this acute new nose alone. He wagged his tail amicably at Ozzy and set up off the canyon on a long, easy lope.

For hours loping was enough—simply and purely enjoying one's wolfness was the finest pleasure one could ask. Wolf left the canyon and turned up into the hills, past the Big C and on into noble wildness that seemed far remote from all campus civilization. His brave new legs were stanch and tireless, his wind seemingly inexhaustible. Every turning brought fresh and vivid scents of soil and leaves and air, and life was shimmering and beautiful.

But a few hours of this, and Wolf realized that he was damned lonely. All this grand exhilaration was very well, but if his mate Gloria were loping by his side— And what fun was it to be something as splendid as a wolf if no one admired you? He began to want people, and he turned back to the city.

Berkeley goes to bed early. The streets were deserted. Here and there a light burned in a rooming house where some solid grind was plodding on his almost-due term paper. Wolf had done that himself. He couldn't laugh in this shape, but his tail twitched with amusement at the thought.

He paused along the tree-lined street. There was a fresh human scent here, though the street seemed empty. Then he heard a soft whimpering, and trotted off toward the noise.

Behind the shrubbery fronting an apartment house sat a disconsolate two-year-old, shivering in his sunsuit and obviously lost for hours on hours. Wolf put a paw on the child's shoulder and shook him gently.

The boy looked around and was not in the least afraid. "He'o," he said, brightening up.

Wolf growled a cordial greeting, and wagged his tail and pawed at the ground to indicate that he'd take the lost infant wherever it wanted to go.

The child stood up and wiped away its tears with a dirty fist which left wide, black smudges. "Toot-tootootoo!" he said.

Games, thought Wolf. He wants to play choo-choo. He took the child by the sleeve and tugged gently.

"Tootootootoo!" the boy repeated firmly. "Die way."

The sound of a railway whistle, to be sure, does die away; but this seemed a poetic expression for such a toddler. Wolf thought, and then abruptly would have snapped his fingers if he'd had them. The child was saying "2222 Dwight Way," having been carefully brought up to tell its address when lost. Wolf glanced up at the street sign. Bowditch and Hillegas—2222 Dwight would be just a couple of blocks.

Wolf tried to nod his head, but the muscles didn't seem to work that way. Instead he wagged his tail in what he hoped indicated comprehension, and started off leading the child.

The infant beamed and said, "Nice woof-woof."

For an instant Wolf felt like a spy suddenly addressed by his right name, then realized that if some say "bow-wow" others might well say "woof-woof."

He led the child for two blocks without event. It felt good, having an innocent human being put his whole life and trust in your charge like this. There was something about children; he hoped Gloria felt the same. He wondered what would happen if he could teach this confiding infant The Word. It would be swell to have a pup that would—

He paused. His nose twitched and the hair on the back of his neck rose. Ahead of them stood a dog, a huge mongrel, seemingly a mixture of

St. Bernard and Husky. But the growl that issued from his throat indicated that carrying brandy kegs or rushing serum was not for him. He was a bandit, an outlaw, an enemy of man and dog. And they had to pass him.

Wolf had no desire to fight. He was as big as this monster and certainly, with his human brain, much cleverer; but scars from a dog fight would not look well on the human body of Professor Wolf, and there was, moreover, the danger of hurting the toddler in the fracas. It would be wiser to cross the street. But before he could steer the child that way, the mongrel brute had charged at them, yapping and snarling.

Wolf placed himself in front of the boy, poised and ready to leap in defense. The scar problem was secondary to the fact that this baby had trusted him. He was ready to face this cur and teach him a lesson, at whatever cost to his own human body. But halfway to him the huge dog stopped. His growls died away to a piteous whimper. His great flanks trembled in the moonlight. His tail curled craven between his legs. And abruptly he turned and fled.

The child crowed delightedly. "Bad woof-woof go way." He put his little arms around Wolf's neck. "*Nice* woof-woof." Then he straightened up and said insistently, "Tootootootoo. Die way," and Wolf led on, his strong wolf's heart pounding as it had never pounded at the embrace of a woman.

"Tootootootoo" was a small, frame house set back from the street in a large yard. The lights were still on, and even from the sidewalk Wolf could hear a woman's shrill voice.

"—since five o'clock this afternoon, and you've got to find him, officer. You simply must. We've hunted all over the neighborhood and—"

Wolf stood up against the wall on his hindlegs and rang the doorbell with his front right paw.

"Oh! Maybe that's somebody now. The neighbors said they'd— Come, officer, and let's see— Oh!"

At the same moment Wolf barked politely, the toddler yelled "Mamma!" and his thin and worn-looking young mother let out a scream half delight at finding her child and half terror of this large, gray canine shape that loomed behind him. She snatched up the infant protectively and turned to the large man in uniform. "Officer! Look! That big dreadful thing! It stole my Robby!"

"No," Robby protested firmly. "Nice woof-woof."

The officer laughed. "The lad's probably right, ma'am. It *is* a nice woof-woof. Found your boy wandering around and helped him home. You haven't maybe got a bone for him?"

"Let that big, nasty brute into my home? Never! Come on, Robby."

"Want my nice woof-woof."

"I'll woof-woof you, staying out till all hours and giving your father and me the fright of our lives. Just wait till your father sees you, young man; he'll— Oh, good night, officer!" And she shut the door on the yowls of Robby.

The policeman patted Wolf's head. "Never mind about the bone, Rover. She didn't so much as offer me a glass of beer, either. My, you're a husky specimen, aren't you, boy? Look almost like a wolf. Who do you belong to, and what are you doing wandering about alone? Huh?" He turned on his flash and bent over to look at the nonexistent collar.

He straightened up and whistled. "No license. Rover, that's bad. You know what I ought to do? I ought to turn you in. If you weren't a hero that just got cheated out of his bone, I'd— Hell, I ought to do it, anyway. Laws are laws, even for heroes. Come on, Rover. We're going for a walk."

Wolf thought quickly. The pound was the last place on earth he wanted to wind up. Even Ozzy would never think of looking for him there. Nobody'd claim him, nobody'd say *Absarka!* and in the end a dose of chloroform— He wrenched loose from the officer's grasp on his hair, and with one prodigious leap cleared the yard, landed on the sidewalk, and started hell for leather up the street. But the instant he was out of the officer's sight he stopped dead and slipped behind a hedge.

He scented the policeman's approach even before he heard it. The man was running with the lumbering haste of two hundred pounds. But opposite the hedge he, too, stopped. For a moment Wolf wondered if his ruse had failed; but the officer had paused only to scratch his head and mutter, "Say! There's something screwy here. *Who rang that doorbell?* The kid couldn't reach it, and the dog— Oh, well," he concluded. "Nuts," and seemed to find in that monosyllabic summation the solution to all his problems.

As his footsteps and smell died away, Wolf became aware of another scent. He had only just identified it as cat when someone said, "You're were, aren't you?"

Wolf started up, lips drawn back and muscles tense. There was nothing human in sight, but someone had spoken to him. Unthinkingly, he tried to say "Where are you?" but all that came out was a growl.

"Right behind you. Here in the shadows. You can scent me, can't you?"

"But you're a cat," Wolf thought in his snarls. "And you're talking."

"Of course. But I'm not talking human language. It's just your brain that takes it that way. If you had your human body, you'd just think I was going *meowrr*. But you are were, aren't you?"

"How do you . . . why do you think so?"

"Because you didn't try to jump me, as any

normal dog would have. And besides, unless Confucius taught me all wrong, you're a wolf, not a dog; and we don't have wolves around here unless they're were."

"How do you know all this? Are you—"

"Oh, no. I'm just a cat. But I used to live next door to a werechow named Confucius. He taught me things."

Wolf was amazed. "You mean he was a man who changed to chow and stayed that way? Lived as a pet?"

"Certainly. This was back at the worst of the depression. He said a dog was more apt to be fed and looked after than a man. I thought it was a smart idea."

"But how terrible! Could a man so debase himself as—"

"Men don't debase themselves. They debase each other. That's the way of most weres. Some change to keep from being debased, others to do a little more effective debasing. Which are you?"

"Why, you see, I—"

"*Sh!* Look. This is going to be fun. Holdup."

Wolf peered around the hedge. A well-dressed, middle-aged man was walking along briskly, apparently enjoying a night constitutional. Behind him moved a thin, silent figure. Even as Wolf watched, the figure caught up with him and whispered harshly, "Up with 'em, buddy!"

The quiet pomposity of the stroller melted away. He was ashen and aspen, as the figure slipped a hand around into his breast pocket and removed an impressive wallet.

And what, thought Wolf, was the good of his

fine, vigorous body if it merely crouched behind hedges as a spectator? In one fine bound, to the shocked amazement of the were-wise cat, he had crossed the hedge and landed with his forepaws full in the figure's face. It went over backward with him on top and then there was a loud noise, a flash of light, and a frightful sharp smell. For a moment Wolf felt an acute pang in his shoulder, like the jab of a long needle, and then the pain was gone.

But his momentary recoil had been enough to let the figure get to its feet. "Missed you, huh?" it muttered. "Let's see how you like a slug in the belly, you interfering—" and he applied an epithet which would have been purely literal description if Wolf had not been were.

There were three quick shots in succession even as Wolf sprang. For a second he experienced the most acute stomach-ache of his life. Then he landed again. The figure's head hit the concrete sidewalk and he was still.

Lights were leaping into brightness everywhere. Among all the confused noises, Wolf could hear the shrill complaints of Robby's mother, and among all the compounded smells, he could distinguish scent of the policeman who wanted to impound him. That meant getting the hell out, and quick.

The city meant trouble, Wolf decided as he loped off. He could endure loneliness while he practiced his wolfry, until he had Gloria. Though just as a precaution he must arrange with Ozzy about a plausible-looking collar, and—

The most astounding realization yet suddenly struck him! He had received four bullets, three of them square in the stomach, and he hadn't a wound to show for it! Being a werewolf certainly offered its practical advantages. Think what a criminal could do with such bullet-proofing. Or—But no. He was a werewolf for fun, and that was that.

But even for a werewolf, being shot, though relatively painless, is tiring. A great deal of nervous energy is absorbed in the magical and instantaneous knitting of those wounds. And when Wolfe Wolf reached the peace and calm of the uncivilized hills, he no longer felt like reveling in freedom. Instead he stretched out to his full length, nuzzled his head down between his forepaws, and slept.

"Now the essence of magic," said Heliophagus of Smyrna, "is deceit; and that deceit is of two kinds. By magic, the magician deceives others; but magic deceives the magician himself."

So far the lycanthropic magic of Wolfe Wolf had worked smoothly and pleasantly, but now it was to show him the second trickery that lurks behind every magic trick. And the first step was that he slept.

He woke in confusion. His dreams had been human—and of Gloria—despite the body in which he *dreamed* them, and it took several full minutes for him to reconstruct just how he happened to be in that body. For a moment the dream, even that episode in which he and Gloria had been eating blueberry waffles on a roller coaster, seemed more sanely plausible than the reality.

But he readjusted quickly, and glanced up at the sky. The sun looked as though it had been up at least an hour, which meant in April that the time was somewhere between six and seven. Today was Thursday, which meant that he was saddled with an eight-o'clock class. That left plenty of time to change back, shave, dress, breakfast and resume the normal life of Professor Wolf, which was, after all, important if he intended to support a wife.

He tried, as he trotted through the streets, to look as tame and unwolflike as possible, and apparently succeeded. No one paid him any mind save children, who wanted to play, and dogs, who began by snarling and ended by cowering away terrified. His friend the cat might be curiously tolerant of weres, but not so dogs.

He trotted up the steps of the Berkeley Inn confidently. The clerk was under a slight spell and would not notice wolves. There was nothing to do but rouse Ozzy, be *absarka'd,* and—

"Hey! Where you going? Get out of here! Shoo!"

It was the clerk, a stanch and brawny young man, who straddled the stairway and vigorously waved him off.

"No dogs in here! Go on now. Scoot!"

Quite obviously this man was under no spell, and equally obviously there was no way of getting up that staircase short of using a wolf's strength to tear the clerk apart. For a second Wolf hesitated. He had to get changed back. It would be a damnable pity to use his powers to injure another human being—if only he had not slept and arrived before this unmagicked day clerk came on duty—but necessity knows no—

Then the solution hit him. Wolf turned and loped off just as the clerk hurled an ash tray at him. Bullets may be relatively painless, but even a werewolf's rump, he learned promptly, is sensitive to flying glass.

The solution was foolproof. The only trouble was that it meant an hour's wait, and he was hungry. Damnably hungry. He found himself even displaying a certain shocking interest in the plump occupant of a baby carriage. You do get different appetites with a different body. He could understand how some originally well-intentioned werewolves might in time become monsters. But he was stronger in will, and much smarter. His stomach could hold out until this plan worked.

The janitor had already opened the front door

of Wheeler Hall, but the building was deserted. Wolf had no trouble reaching the second floor unnoticed or finding his classroom. He had a little more trouble holding the chalk between his teeth and a slight tendency to gag on the dust; but by balancing his forepaws on the eraser trough, he could manage quite nicely. It took three springs to catch the ring of the chart in his teeth, but once that was pulled down there was nothing to do but crouch under the desk and pray that he would not starve quite to death.

The students of German 31B, as they assembled reluctantly for their eight o'clock, were a little puzzled at being confronted by a chart dealing with the influence of the gold standard on world economy, but they decided simply that the janitor had been forgetful.

The wolf under the desk listened unseen to their gathering murmurs, overheard that cute blonde in the front row make dates with three different men for that same night, and finally decided that enough had assembled to make his chances plausible. He slipped out from under the desk far enough to reach the ring of the chart, tugged at it, and let go.

The chart flew up with a rolling crash. The students broke off their chatter, looked up at the blackboard, and beheld in a huge and shaky scrawl the mysterious letters

A B S A R K A

It worked. With enough people, it was an almost mathematical certainty that one of them in his puzzlement—for the race of stubtitle readers, though handicapped by the talkies, still exists—would read the mysterious word aloud. It was the much-bedated blonde who did it.

"*Absarka,*" she said wonderingly.

And there was Professor Wolfe Wolf, beaming cordially at his class.

The only flaw was this: He had forgotten that he was only a werewolf, and not Hyperman. His clothes were still at the Berkeley Inn, and here on the lecture platform he was stark naked.

Two of his best pupils screamed and one fainted. The blonde only giggled appreciatively.

Emily was incredulous but pitying.

Professor Fearing was sympathetic but reserved.

The chairman of the department was cool.

The dean of letters was chilly.

The president of the university was frigid.

Wolfe Wolf was unemployed.

And Heliophagus of Smyrna was right. "The essence of magic is deceit."

"But what can I do?" Wolf moaned into his zombie glass. "I'm stuck. I'm stymied. Gloria arrives in Berkeley tomorrow, and here I am—nothing. Nothing but a futile, worthless werewolf. You can't support a wife on that. You can't raise a family. You can't— Hell, you can't even propose— I want another. Sure you won't have one?"

Ozymandias the Great shook his round, fringed head. "The last time I took two drinks I started all this. I've got to behave if I want to stop it. But you're an able-bodied, strapping, young man; surely, colleague, you can get work?"

"Where? All I'm trained for is academic work, and this scandal has put the kibosh on that forever. What university is going to hire a man who showed up naked in front of his class without even the excuse of being drunk? And supposing I try something else—say one of these jobs in defense that all my students seem to be getting—I'd have to give references, say something about what I'd been doing with my thirty-odd years. And once these references were checked— Ozzy, I'm a lost man."

"Never despair, colleague. I've learned that magic gets you into some tight squeezes, but there's always a way of getting out. Now take that time in Darjeeling—"

"But what can I do? I'll wind up like Confucius the werechow and live off charity, if you'll find me somebody who wants a pet wolf."

"You know," Ozymandias reflected, "you may have something there, colleague."

"Nuts! That was a gag. I can at least retain my self-respect, even if I go on relief doing it. And I'll bet they don't like naked men on relief, either."

"No. I don't mean just being a pet wolf. But look at it this way: What are your assets? You have only two outstanding abilities. One of them is to teach German, and that is now completely out."

"Check."

"And the other is to change yourself into a wolf. All right, colleague. There must be some commercial possibilities in that. Let's look into them."

"Nonsense."

"Not quite. For every merchandise there's a market. The trick is to find it. And you, colleague, are going to be the first practical commercial werewolf on record."

"I could— They say Ripley's Odditorium pays good money. Supposing I changed six times a day regular for delighted audiences?"

Ozymandias shook his head sorrowfully. "It's no good. People don't want to see real magic. It makes 'em uncomfortable—starts 'em wondering what else might be loose in the world. They've got to feel sure it's all done with mirrors. I know. I had to quit vaudeville because I wasn't smart enough at faking it; all I could do was the real thing."

"I could be a Seeing Eye dog, maybe?"

"They have to be female."

"When I'm changed I can understand animal

language. Maybe I could be a dog trainer and—No, that's out. I forgot; they're scared to death of me."

But Ozymandias' pale-blue eyes had lit up at the suggestion. "Colleague, you're warm. Oh, are you warm! Tell me: Why did you say your fabulous Gloria was coming to Berkeley?"

"Publicity for a talent hunt."

"For what?"

"A dog to star in 'Fangs of the Forest.'"

"And what kind of a dog?"

"A—" Wolf's eyes widened and his jaw sagged. "A wolf dog," he said softly.

And the two men looked at each other with a wild surmise—silent, beside a bar in Berkeley.

"It's all the fault of that damned Disney dog," the trainer complained. "Pluto does anything. Everything. So our poor mutts are expected to do likewise. Listen to that dope! 'The dog should come into the room, give one paw to the baby, indicate that he recognizes the hero in his Eskimo disguise, go over to the table, find the bone, and clap his paws gleefully!' Now who's got a set of signals to cover stuff like that? Pluto!" he snorted.

Gloria Garton said, "Oh." By that one sound she managed to convey that she sympathized deeply, that the trainer was a nice-looking young man whom she'd just as soon see again, and that no dog star was going to steal "Fangs of the Forest" from her. She adjusted her skirt slightly, leaned back, and made the plain wooden chair on the bare theater stage seem more than ever like a throne.

"All right." The man in the violet beret waved away the last unsuccessful applicant and read from a card: "Dog: Wopsy. Owner: Mrs. Channing Galbraith. Trainer: Luther Newby. Bring it in."

An assistant scurried offstage, and there was a sound of whines and whimpers as a door opened.

"What's got into those dogs today?" the man in the violet beret demanded. "They all seem scared to death and beyond."

"I think," said Fergus O'Breen, "that it's that big, gray wolf dog. Somehow, the others just don't like him."

Gloria Garton lowered her bepurpled lids and cast a queenly stare of suspicion on the young detective. There was nothing wrong with his being there. His sister was head of publicity for Metropolis, and he'd handled several confidential cases for the studio, even one for her, that time her chauffeur had decided to try his hand at blackmail. Fergus O'Breen was a Metropolis fixture; but still it bothered her.

The assistant brought in Mrs. Gailbraith's Wopsy. The man in the violet beret took one look and screamed. The scream bounced back from every wall of the theater in the ensuing minute of silence. At last he found words. "A wolf dog! 'Tookah is the greatest role ever written for a wolf dog! And what do they bring us! A terrier yet! So if we wanted a terrier we could cast Asta!"

"But if you'd only let us show you—" Wopsy's tall, young trainer started to protest.

"Get out!" the man in the violet beret shrieked. "Get out before I lose my temper!"

Wopsy and her trainer slunk off.

"In El Paso," the casting director lamented, "they bring me a Mexican hairless. In St. Louis it's a Pekinese yet! And if I do find a wolf dog, it sits in a corner and waits for somebody to bring in a sled to pull."

"Maybe," said Fergus, "you should try a real wolf."

"Wolf, *schmolf!* We'll end up wrapping John Barrymore in a wolfskin—" He picked up the next card. "Dog: Yoggoth. Owner and trainer: Mr. O. Z. Manders. Bring it in."

The whining noise offstage ceased as Yoggoth was brought out to be tested. The man in the violet beret hardly glanced at the fringe-bearded owner and trainer. He had eyes only for that splendid gray wolf. "If you can only act—" he prayed, with the same fervor with which many a man has thought, "If you could only cook—"

He pulled the beret to an even more unlikely angle and snapped, "All right, Mr. Manders. The dog should come into the room, give one paw to the baby, indicate that he recognizes the hero in his Eskimo disguise, go over to the table, find the bone, and clap his paws joyfully. Baby here, here, here, table here. Got that?"

Mr. Manders looked at his wolf dog and repeated, "Got that?"

Yoggoth wagged his tail.

"Very well, colleague," said Mr. Manders. "Do it."

Yoggoth did it.

The violet beret sailed into the flies, on the wings of its owner's triumphal scream of joy. "He did it!" he kept burbling. "He did it!"

"Of course, colleague," said Mr. Manders calmly.

The trainer who hated Pluto had a face as blank as a vampire's mirror. Fergus O'Breen was speechless with wonderment. Even Gloria Garton permitted surprise and interest to cross her regal mask.

"You mean he can do anything?" gurgled the man who used to have a violet beret.

"Anything," said Mr. Manders.

"Can he— Let's see, in the dance-hall sequence—can he knock a man down, roll him over, and frisk his back pocket?"

Even before Mr. Manders could say "Of course," Yoggoth had demonstrated, using Fergus O'Breen as a convenient dummy.

"Peace!" the casting director sighed. "Peace—

Charley!" he yelled to his assistant. "Send 'em all away. No more try-outs. We've found Tookah! It's wonderful."

The trainer stepped up to Mr. Manders. "It's more than that, sir. It's positively superhuman. I'll swear I couldn't detect the slightest signal, and for such complicated operations, too. Tell me, Mr. Manders, what system do you use?"

Mr. Manders made a Moople-ish *kaff-kaff* noise. "Professional secret, you understand, young man. I'm planning on opening a school when I retire, but obviously until then—"

"Of course, sir. I understand. But I've never seen anything like it in all my born days."

"I wonder," Fergus O'Breen observed abstractly from the floor, "if your marvel dog can get off of people, too?"

Mr. Manders stifled a grin. "Of course! Yoggoth!"

Fergus picked himself up and dusted from his clothes the grime of the stage, which is the most clinging grime on earth. "I'd swear," he muttered, "that beast of yours enjoyed that."

"No hard feelings, I trust, Mr.—"

"O'Breen. None at all. In fact, I'd suggest a little celebration in honor of this great event. I know you can't buy a drink this near the campus, so I brought along a bottle just in case."

"Oh," said Gloria Garton, implying that carousals were ordinarily beneath her, that this, however, was a special occasion, and that possibly there was something to be said for the green-eyed detective, after all.

This was all too easy, Wolfe Wolf-Yoggoth kept thinking. There was a catch to it somewhere. This was certainly the ideal solution to the problem of how to earn money as a werewolf. Bring an understanding of human speech and instructions into a fine animal body, and you are the answer to a director's prayer. It was perfect as long as it lasted; and if "Fangs of the Forest" was a smash hit, there were bound to be other Yoggoth pictures. Look at Rin-tin-tin. But it was too easy—

His ears caught a familiar "Oh" and his attention reverted to Gloria. This "Oh" had meant that she really shouldn't have another drink, but since liquor didn't affect her any way and this was a special occasion, she might as well.

She was even more beautiful than he had remembered. Her golden hair was shoulder-length now, and flowed with such rippling perfection that it was all he could do to keep from reaching out a paw to it. Her body had ripened, too, was even more warm and promising than his memories of her. And in his new shape he found her greatest charm in something he had not been able to appreciate fully as a human being, the deep, heady scent of her flesh.

"To 'Fangs of the Forest'!" Fergus O'Breen was toasting. "And may that pretty-boy hero of yours get a worse mauling than I did."

Wolf-Yoggoth grinned to himself. That had been fun. That'd teach the detective to go crawling around hotel rooms.

"And while we're celebrating, colleagues," said Ozymandias the Great, "why should we neglect our star? Here, Yoggoth." And he held out the bottle.

"He drinks yet!" the casting director exclaimed delightedly.

"Sure. He was weaned on it."

Wolf took a sizable gulp. It felt good. Warm and rich—almost the way Gloria smelled.

"But how about you, Mr. Manders?" the detective insisted for the fifth time. "It's your celebration really. The poor beast won't get the four-figure checks from Metropolis. And you've taken only one drink."

"Never take two, colleague. I know my danger point. Two drinks in me and things start happening."

"More should happen yet than training miracle dogs? Go on, O'Breen. Make him drink. We should see what happens."

Fergus took another long drink himself. "Go on. There's another bottle in the car, and I've gone far enough to be resolved not to leave here sober. And I don't want sober companions, either." His green eyes were already beginning to glow with a new wildness.

"No, thank you, colleague."

Gloria Garton left her throne, walked over to the plump man, and stood close, her soft hand resting on his arm. "Oh," she said, implying that dogs were dogs, but still that the party was inevitably in her honor and his refusal to drink was a personal insult.

Ozymandias the Great looked at Gloria, sighed, shrugged, resigned himself to fate, and drank.

"Have you trained many dogs?" the casting director asked.

"Sorry, colleague. This is my first."

"All the more wonderful! But what's your profession otherwise?"

"Well, you see, I'm a magician."

"Oh," said Gloria Garton, implying delight, and went so far as to add, "I have a friend who does black magic."

"I'm afraid, ma'am, mine's simply white. That's tricky enough. With the black you're in for some real dangers."

"Hold on!" Fergus interposed. "You mean really a magician? Not just presti. . . sleight of hand?"

"Of course, colleague."

"Good theater," said the casting director. "Never let 'em see the mirrors."

"Uh-huh," Fergus nodded. "But look, Mr. Manders. What can you do, for instance?"

"Well, I can change—"

Yoggoth barked loudly.

"Oh, no," Ozymandias covered hastily, "that's really a little beyond me. But I can—"

"Can you do the Indian rope trick?" Gloria asked languidly. "My friend says that's terribly hard."

"Hard? Why, ma'am, there's nothing to it. I can remember that time in Darjeeling—"

Fergus took another long drink. "I," he announced defiantly, "want to see the Indian rope trick. I have met people who've met people who've pet meople who've seen it, but that's as close as I ever get. And I don't believe it."

"But, colleague, it's so simple."

"I don't believe it."

Ozymandias the Great drew himself up to his full lack of height. "Colleague, you are about to see it!" Yoggoth tugged warningly at his coat tails. "Leave me alone, Wolf. An aspersion has been cast!"

Fergus returned from the wings dragging a soiled length of rope. "This do?"

"Admirably."

"What goes?" the casting director demanded.

"Shh!" said Gloria. "Oh—"

She beamed worshipfully on Ozymandias, whose chest swelled to the point of threatening the security of his buttons. "Ladies and gentlemen!" he announced, in the manner of one prepared to fill a vast amphitheater with his voice. "You are about to behold Ozymandias the Great in—The Indian Rope Trick! Of course," he added conversation-

ally, "I haven't got a small boy to chop into mincemeat, unless perhaps one of you— No? Well, we'll try it without. Not quite so impressive, though. And will you stop yapping, Wolf?"

"I thought his name was Yogi," said Fergus.

"Yoggoth. But since he's part wolf on his mother's side— Now quiet, all of you!"

He had been coiling the rope as he spoke. Now he placed the coil in the center of the stage, where it lurked like a threatening rattler. He stood beside it and deftly, professionally, went through a series of passes and mumblings so rapidly that even the superhumanly sharp eyes and ears of Wolf-Yoggoth could not follow them.

The end of the rope detached itself from the coil, reared in the air, turned for a moment like a head uncertain where to strike, then shot straight up until all the rope was uncoiled. The lower end rested a good inch above the stage.

Gloria gasped. The casting director drank hurriedly. Fergus, for some reason, stared curiously at the wolf.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen—oh, hang it, I do wish I had a boy to carve—Ozymandias the Great will ascend this rope into that land which only the users of the rope may know. Onward and upward! Be right back," he added reassuringly to Wolf.

His plump hands grasped the rope above his head and gave a little jerk. His knees swung up and clasped about the hempen pillar. And up he went, like a monkey on a stick, up and up and up—

—until suddenly he was gone.

Just gone. That was all there was to it. Gloria was beyond even saying "Oh." The casting director sat his beautiful flannels down on the filthy floor and gaped. Fergus swore softly and melodiously. And Wolf felt a premonitory prickling in his spine.

The stage door opened, admitting two men in denim pants and work shirts. "Hey!" said the first. "Where do you think you are?"

"We're from Metropolis Pictures," the casting director started to explain, scrambling to his feet.

"I don't care if you're from Washington, we gotta clear this stage. There's movies here tonight. Come on, Joe, help me get 'em out. And that pooch, too."

"You can't, Fred," said Joe reverently, and pointed. His voice sank to an awed whisper. "That's Gloria Garton—"

"So it is. Hi, Miss Garton. Cripes, wasn't that last one of yours a stinkeroo!"

"Your public, darling," Fergus murmured.

"Come on!" Fred shouted. "Out of here. We gotta clear up. And you, Joe! Strike that rope!"

Before Fergus could move, before Wolf could leap to the rescue, the efficient stage hand had struck the rope and was coiling it up.

Wolf stared up into the flies. There was nothing up there. Nothing at all. Some place beyond the end of that rope was the only man on earth he could trust to say *Absarka!* for him; and the way down was cut off forever.

Wolfe Wolf sprawled on the floor of Gloria Garton's boudoir and watched that vision of volupty change into her most fetching negligee.

The situation was perfect. It was the fulfillment of all his dearest dreams. The only flaw was that he was still in a wolf's body.

Gloria turned, leaned over, and chucked him under the snout. "Wuzzum a cute wolf dog, wuzzum?"

Wolf could not restrain a snarl.

"Doesn't um like Gloria to talk baby talk? Um was a naughty wolf, yes, um was."

It was torture. Here you are in your best beloved's hotel room, all her beauty revealed to your hungry eyes, and she talks baby talk to you! Wolf had been happy at first when Gloria suggested that she might take over the care of her co-star pending the reappearance of his trainer—for none of them was quite willing to admit that "Mr. O. Z. Manders" might truly and definitely have vanished—but he was beginning to realize that the situation might bring on more torment than pleasure.

"Wolves are funny," Gloria observed. She was more talkative when alone, with no need to be cryptically fascinating. "I knew a Wolf once, only that was his name. He was a man. And he was a funny one."

Wolf felt his heart beating fast under his gray fur. To hear his own name on Gloria's warm lips— But before she could go on to tell her pet how funny Wolf was, her maid rapped on the door.

"A Mr. O'Breen to see you, madam."

"Tell him to go 'way."

"He says it's important, and he does look, madam, as though he might make trouble."

"Oh, all right." Gloria rose and wrapped her negligee more respectably about her. "Come on, Yog— No, that's a silly name. I'm going to call you Wolfie. That's cute. Come on, Wolfie, and protect me from the big, bad detective."

Fergus O'Breen was pacing the sitting room with a certain vicious deliberateness in his strides. He broke off and stood still as Gloria and the wolf entered.

"So?" he observed tersely. "Reinforcements?"

"Will I need them?" Gloria cooed.

"Look, light of my love life." The glint in the green eyes was cold and deadly. "You've been playing games, and whatever their nature, there's one thing they're not. And that's cricket."

Gloria gave him her slow, languid smile. "You're amusing, Fergus."

"Thanks. I doubt, however, if your activities are."

"You're still a little boy playing cops and robbers. And what boogyman are you after now?"

"Ha-ha," said Fergus politely. "And you know the answer to that question better than I do. That's why I'm here."

Wolf was puzzled. This conversation meant nothing to him. And yet he sensed a tension of danger in the air as clearly as though he could smell it.

"Go on," Gloria snapped impatiently. "And remember how dearly Metropolis Pictures will thank you for annoying one of its best box-office attractions."

"Some things, my sweeting, are more important than pictures, though you mightn't think it where you come from. One of them is a certain federation of forty-eight units. Another is an abstract concept called democracy."

"And so?"

"And so I want to ask you one question: Why did you come to Berkeley?"

"For publicity on 'Fangs,' of course. It was your sister's idea."

"You've gone temperamental and turned down better ones. Why leap at this?"

"You don't haunt publicity stunts yourself, Fergus. Why are you here?"

Fergus was pacing again. "And why was your first act in Berkeley a visit to the office of the German department?"

"Isn't that natural enough? I used to be a student here."

"Majoring in dramatics, and you didn't go near the Little Theater. Why the German department?" He paused and stood straight in front of her, fixing her with his green gaze.

Gloria assumed the attitude of a captured queen defying the barbarian conqueror. "Very well. If you must know—I went to the German department to see the man I love."

Wolf held his breath, and tried to keep his tail from thrashing.

"Yes," she went on impassionedly, "you strip the last veil from me, and force me to confess to you what he alone should have heard first. This man proposed to me by mail. I foolishly rejected his proposal. But I thought and thought—and at last I knew. When I came to Berkeley I had to see him—"

"And did you?"

"The little mouse of a secretary told me he wasn't there. But I shall see him yet. And when I do—"

Fergus bowed stiffly. "My congratulations to you both, my sweeting. And the name of this more than fortunate gentleman?"

"Professor Wolfe Wolf."

"Who is doubtless the individual referred to in this?" He whipped a piece of paper from his sport coat and thrust it at Gloria. She paled and was silent. But Wolfe Wolf did not wait for her reply. He did not care. He knew the solution to his problem now, and he was streaking unobserved for her boudoir.

Gloria Garton entered the boudoir a minute later, a shaken and wretched woman. She unstoppered one of the delicate perfume bottles on her dresser and poured herself a stiff tot of whiskey. Then her eyebrows lifted in surprise as she stared at her mirror. Scrawlingly lettered across the glass in her own deep-crimson lipstick was the mysterious word

A B S A R K A

Frowning, she said it aloud. *"Absarka—"*

From behind a screen stepped Professor Wolfe Wolf, incongruously wrapped in one of Gloria's lushest dressing robes. "Gloria dearest—" he cried.

"Wolf!" she exclaimed. "What on earth are you doing here in my room?"

"I love you. I've always loved you since you couldn't tell a strong from a weak verb. And now that I know that you love me—"

"This is terrible. Please get out of here!"

"Gloria—"

"Get out of here, or I'll sick my dog on you. Wolfie— Here, nice Wolfie!"

"I'm sorry, Gloria. But Wolfie won't answer you."

"Oh, you beast! Have you hurt Wolfie? Have you—"

"I wouldn't touch a hair on his pelt. Because, you see, Gloria darling, I am Wolfie."

"What on earth do you—" Gloria stared around the room. It was undeniable that there was no trace of the presence of a wolf dog. And here was a man dressed only in one of her robes and no sign of his own clothes. And after that funny little man and the rope—

"You thought I was drab and dull," Wolf went on. "You thought I'd sunk into an academic rut. You'd sooner have an actor or a G-man. But I, Gloria, am something more exciting than you've ever dreamed of. There's not another soul on earth I'd tell this to; but I, Gloria, am a werewolf."

Gloria gasped. "That isn't possible! But it does all fit in. What I heard about you on campus, and your friend with the funny beard and how he vanished, and, of course, it explains how you did tricks that any real dog couldn't possibly do—"

"Don't you believe me, darling?"

Gloria rose from the dresser chair and went into his arms. "I believe you, dear. And it's wonderful! I'll bet there's not another woman in all Hollywood that was ever married to a werewolf!"

"Then you will—"

"But of course, dear. We can work it out beautifully. We'll hire a stooge to be your trainer on the lot. You can work daytimes, and come home

at night and I'll say *Absarka!* for you. It'll be perfect."

"Gloria—" Wolf murmured with tender reverence.

"One thing, dear. Just a little thing. Would you do Gloria a favor?"

"Anything!"

"Show me how you change. Change for me now. Then I'll *Absarka* you back right away."

Wolf said The Word. He was in such ecstatic bliss that he hardly felt the pang this time. He capered about the room with all the litheness of his fine wolfish legs, and ended up before Gloria, wagging his tail and looking for approval.

Gloria patted his head. "Good boy, Wolfie. And now, darling, you can just damned well stay that way."

Wolf let out a yelp of amazement.

"You heard me, Wolfie. You're staying that way. You didn't happen to believe any of that guff I was feeding the detective, did you? Love you? I should waste my time! But this way you can be very useful to me. With your trainer gone, I can take charge of you and pick up an extra thousand a week or so. I won't mind that. And Professor Wolfe Wolf will have vanished forever, which fits right in with my plans."

Wolf snarled.

"Now don't try to get nasty, Wolfie darling. Um wouldn't threaten ums darling Gloria, would ums? Remember what I can do for you. I'm the only person that can turn you into a man again. You wouldn't dare teach anyone else that. You wouldn't dare let people know what you really are. An ignorant person would kill you. A smart one would have you locked up as a lunatic."

Wolf still advanced threateningly.

"Oh, no. You can't hurt me. Because all I'd have to do would be to say the word on the mirror. Then you wouldn't be a dangerous wolf any more. You'd just be a man here in my room, and I'd scream. And after what happened on the campus yesterday, how long do you think you'd stay out of the madhouse?"

Wolf backed away and let his tail droop.

"You see, Wolfie darling? Gloria has ums just where he wants ums. And ums is damned well going to be a good boy."

There was a rap on the boudoir door, and Gloria called, "Come in."

"A gentleman to see you, madam," the maid announced. "A Professor Fearing."

Gloria smiled her best cruel and queenly smile. "Come along, Wolfie. This may interest you."

Professor Oscar Fearing, overflowing one of the graceful chairs of the sitting room, beamed benevolently as Gloria and the wolf entered. "Ah, my dear! A new pet. Touching."

"And what a pet, Oscar. Wait till you hear."

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Professor Fearing buffed his pince-nez against his sleeve. "And wait, my dear, until you hear all that I have learned. Chiswick has perfected his protective screen against magnetic bombs, and the official trial is set for next week. And Farnsworth has all but completed his researches on a new process for obtaining osmium. Gas warfare may start any day, and the power that can command a plentiful supply of—"

"Fine, Oscar," Gloria broke in. "But we can go over all this later. We've got other worries right now."

"What do you mean, my dear?"

"Have you run onto a red-headed young Irishman in a yellow shirt?"

"No, I— Why, yes. I did see such an individual leaving the office yesterday. I believe he had been to see Wolf."

"He's on to us. He's a detective from Los Angeles, and he's tracking us down. Some place he got hold of a scrap of record that should have been destroyed. He knows I'm in it, and he knows I'm tied up with somebody here in the German department."

Professor Fearing scrutinized his pince-nez, approved of their cleanness, and set them on his nose. "Not so much excitement, my dear. No hysteria. Let us approach this calmly. Does he know about the Temple of the Dark Truth?"

"Not yet. Nor about you. He just knows it's somebody in the department."

"Then what could be simpler? You have heard of the strange conduct of Wolfe Wolf?"

"Have I?" Gloria laughed harshly.

"Everyone knows of Wolf's infatuation with you. Throw the blame onto him. It should be easy to clear yourself and make you appear an innocent tool. Direct all attention to him and the organization will be safe. The Temple of the Dark Truth can go its mystic way and extract even more invaluable information from weary scientists who need the emotional release of a false religion."

"That's what I've tried to do. I gave O'Breen a long song and dance about my devotion to Wolf, so obviously phony he'd be bound to think it was a cover-up for something else. And I think he bit. But the situation's a damned sight trickier than you guess. Do you know where Wolfe Wolf is?"

"No one knows. After the president . . . ah . . . rebuked him, he seems to have vanished."

Gloria laughed again. "He's right here. In this room."

"My dear! Secret panels and such? You take your espionage too seriously. Where?"

"There!"

Professor Fearing gaped. "Are you serious?"

"As serious as you are about the future of Fascism. That is Wolfe Wolf."

Fearing approached the wolf incredulously and extended his hand.

"He might bite," Gloria warned him a second too late.

Fearing stared at his bleeding hand. "That, at least," he observed, "is undeniably true." And he raised his foot to deliver a sharp kick.

"No, Oscar! Don't! Leave him alone. And you'll have to take my word for it—it's way too complicated. But the wolf is Wolfe Wolf, and I've got him absolutely under control. He's perfectly in our hands. We'll switch suspicion to him, and I'll keep him this way while Fergus and his friends the G-men go off hotfoot on his trail."

"My dear!" Fearing ejaculated. "You're mad. You're more hopelessly mad than the devout members of the Temple." He took off his pince-nez and stared again at the wolf. "And yet Tuesday night— Tell me one thing: From whom did you get this . . . this wolf dog?"

"From a funny plump little man with a fringy beard."

Fearing gasped. Obviously he remembered the furor in the Temple, and the wolf and the fringe-beard. "Very well, my dear. I believe you. Don't ask me why, but I believe you. And now—"

"Now it's all set, isn't it? We keep him here helpless, and we use him to—"

"The wolf as scapegoat. Yes. Very pretty."

"Oh! One thing—" She was suddenly frightened.

Wolfe Wolf was considering the possibilities of a sudden attack on Fearing. He could probably get out of the room before Gloria could say *Absarka!* But after that? Whom could he trust to restore him? Especially if G-men were to be set on his trail—

"What is it?" Fearing asked.

"That secretary. That little mouse in the department office. She knows it was you I asked for, not Wolf. Fergus can't have talked to her yet, because he swallowed my story; but he will. He's thorough."

"Hm-m-m. Then, in that case—"

"Yes, Oscar?"

"She must be attended to." Professor Oscar Fearing beamed genially and reached for the phone.

Wolf acted instantly, on inspiration and impulse. His teeth were strong, quite strong enough to jerk the phone cord from the wall. That took only a second, and in the next second he was out of the room and into the hall before Gloria could open her mouth to speak that word that would convert him from a powerful and dangerous wolf to a futile man.

There were shrill screams and a shout or two of "Mad dog!" as he dashed through the hotel lobby, but he paid no heed to them. The main thing was

to reach Emily's house before she could be "attended to." Her evidence was essential. That could swing the balance, show Fergus and his G-men where the true guilt lay. And, besides, he admitted to himself, Emily was a damned nice kid—

His rate of collision was about one point six six per block, and the curses heaped upon him, if theologically valid, would have been more than enough to damn him forever. But he was making time, and that was all that counted. He dashed through traffic signals, cut into the path of trucks, swerved from under street cars, and once even leaped over a stalled car which obstructed him. Everything was going fine, he was halfway there, when two hundred pounds of human flesh landed on him in a flying tackle.

He looked up through the brilliant lighting effects of smashing his head on the sidewalk and saw his old Nemesis, the policeman who had been cheated of his beer.

"So, Rover!" said that officer. "Got you at last, did I? Now we'll see if you'll wear a proper license tag. Didn't know I used to play football, did you?"

The officer's grip on his hair was painfully tight. A gleeful crowd was gathering and heckling the policeman with fantastic advice.

"Get along, boys," he admonished. "This is a private matter between me and Rover here. Come on," and he tugged even harder.

Wolf left a large tuft of fur and skin in the officer's grasp and felt the blood ooze out of the bare patch on his neck. He heard a ripe oath and a pistol shot simultaneously, and felt the needle-like sting drive through his shoulder. The awe-struck crowd thawed before him. Two more bullets hied after him, but he was gone, leaving the most dazed policeman in Berkeley.

"I hit him," the officer kept muttering blankly. "I hit the—"

Wolfe Wolf coursed along Dwight Way. Two more blocks and he'd be at the little bungalow that Emily shared with a teaching assistant in something or other. That telephone gag had stopped Fearing only momentarily; the orders would have been given by now, the henchmen would be on their way. But he was almost there—

"He'o!" a child's light voice called to him. "Nice woof-woof came back!"

Across the street was the modest frame dwelling of Robby and his shrewish mother. The child had been playing on the sidewalk. Now he saw his idol and deliverer and started across the street at a lurching toddle. "Nice woof-woof!" he kept calling. "Wait for Robby!"

Wolf kept on. This was no time for playing games with even the most delightful of cubs. And then he saw the car. It was an ancient jellopy, plastered with wisecracks even older than itself; and the high-school youth driving was obviously showing his girl friend how it could make time on this deserted residential street. The girl was a cute dish, and who could be bothered watching out for children?

Robby was directly in front of the car. Wolf leaped straight as a bullet. His trajectory carried him so close to the car that he could feel the heat of the radiator on his flank. His forepaws struck Robby and thrust him out of danger. They fell to the ground together, just as the car ground over the last of Wolf's caudal vertebrae.

The cute dish screamed. "Homer! Did we hit them?"

Homer said nothing, and the jellopy zoomed on.

Robby's screams were louder. "You hurt me! You hurt me! *Baaaaad* woof-woof!"

His mother appeared on the porch and joined in with her own howls of rage. The cacophony was terrific. Wolf let out one wailing yelp of his own, to make it perfect and to lament his crushed tail, and dashed on. This was no time to clear up misunderstandings.

But the two delays had been enough. Robby and the policeman had proved the perfect unwitting tools of Oscar Fearing. As Wolf approached Emily's little bungalow, he saw a gray sedan drive off. In the rear was a small, slim girl, and she was struggling.

Even a werewolf's lithe speed cannot equal a motor car. After a block of pursuit, Wolf gave up and sat back on his haunches panting. It felt funny, he thought even in that tense moment, not to be able to sweat, to have to open your mouth and stick out your tongue and—

"Trouble?" inquired a solicitous voice.

This time Wolf recognized the cat. "Heavens, yes," he assented wholeheartedly. "More than you ever dreamed of."

"Food shortage?" the cat asked. "But that toddler back there is nice and plump."

"Shut up," Wolf snarled.

"Sorry; I was just judging from what Confucius told me about werewolves. You don't mean to tell me that you're an altruistic were?"

"I guess I am. I know werewolves are supposed to go around slaughtering, but right now I've got to save a life."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"It's the truth."

"Ah," the cat reflected philosophically. "Truth is a dark and deceitful thing."

Wolfe Wolf was on his feet. "Thanks," he barked. "You've done it."

"Done what?"

"See you later." And Wolf was off at top speed for the Temple of the Dark Truth.

That was the best chance. That was Fearing's headquarters. The odds were at least even that

when it wasn't being used for services it was the hang-out of his ring, especially since the consulate had been closed in San Francisco. Again the wild running and leaping, the narrow escapes; and where Wolf had not taken these too seriously before, he knew now that he might be immune to bullets, but certainly not to being run over. His tail still stung and ached tormentingly. But he had to get there. He had to clear his own reputation, he kept reminding himself; but what he really thought was, "I have to save Emily."

A block from the Temple he heard the crackle of gunfire. Pistol shots and, he'd swear, machine guns, too. He couldn't figure what it meant, but he pressed on. Then a bright-yellow roadster passed him and a vivid flash came from its window. Instinctively he ducked. You might be immune to bullets, but you still didn't just stand still for them.

The roadster was gone and he was about to follow when a glint of bright metal caught his eye. The bullet which had missed him had hit a brick wall and ricocheted back onto the sidewalk. It glittered there in front of him—pure silver.

This, he realized abruptly, meant the end of his immunity. Fearing had believed Gloria's story, and with his smattering of occult lore he had known the successful counter weapon. A bullet, from now on, might mean no more needle sting, but instant death.

And so Wolfe Wolf went straight on.

He approached the Temple cautiously, lurking behind shrubbery. And he was not the only lurker. Before the Temple, crouching in the shelter of a car every window of which was shattered, were Fergus O'Breen and a moonfaced giant. Each held an automatic, and they were taking pot shots at the steeple.

Wolf's keen, lupine hearing could catch their words even above the firing. "Gabe's around back," Moonface was explaining. "But it's no use. Know what that damned steeple is? It's a revolving machine-gun turret. They've been ready for something like this. Only two men in there, far as we can tell, but that turret covers all the approaches."

"Only two?" Fergus muttered.

"And the girl. They brought a girl here with them. If she's still alive."

Fergus took careful aim at the steeple, fired, and ducked back behind the car as a bullet missed him by millimeters. "Missed him again! By all the kings that ever ruled Tara, Moon, there's got to be a way in there. How about tear gas?"

Moon snorted. "Think you can reach the firing gap in that armored turret at this angle?"

"That girl—" said Fergus.

Wolf waited no longer. As he sprang forward, the gunner noticed him and shifted his fire. It was like a needle shower in which all the spray is solid steel. Wolf's nerves ached with the pain of reknitting. But at least machine guns apparently didn't fire silver.

The front door was locked, but the force of his drive carried him through and added a throbbing ache in his shoulder to his other comforts. The lower-floor guard, a pasty-faced individual with a jutting Adam's apple, sprang up, pistol in hand. Behind him, in the midst of the litter of the cult, ceremonial robes, incense burners, curious books, even a Ouija board, lay Emily.

Pasty-face fired. The bullet struck Wolf full in the chest and for an instant he expected death. But this, too, was lead, and he jumped forward. It was not his usual powerful leap. His strength was almost spent by now. He needed to lie on cool earth and let his nerves knit. And this spring was only enough to grapple with his foe, not to throw him.

The man reversed his useless automatic and brought its butt thudding down on the beast's skull. Wolf reeled back, lost his balance, and fell to the floor. For a moment he could not rise. The temptation was so strong just to lie there and—

The girl moved. Her bound hands grasped a corner of the Ouija board. Somehow, she stumbled to her rope-tied feet and raised her arms. Just as Pasty-face rushed for the prostrate wolf, she brought the heavy board down.

Wolf was on his feet now. There was an instant of temptation. His eyes fixed themselves to the jut of that Adam's apple, and his long tongue licked his jowls. Then he heard the machine-gun fire from the turret, and tore himself from Pasty-face's unconscious form.

Ladders are hard on a wolf, damned near impossible. But if you use your jaws to grasp the rung above you and pull up, it can be done. He was halfway up the ladder when the gunner heard him. The firing stopped, and Wolf heard a rich German oath in what he automatically recognized as an East Prussian dialect with possible Lithuanian influences. Then he saw the man himself, a broken-nosed blond, staring down the ladder well.

The other man's bullets had been lead. So this must be the one with the silver. But it was too late to turn back now. Wolf bit the next rung and hauled up as the bullet struck his snout and stung through. The blond's eyes widened as he fired again and Wolf climbed another round. After the third shot he withdrew precipitately from the opening.

Shots still sounded from below, but the gunner did not return them. He stood frozen against the wall of the turret watching in horror as the wolf emerged from the well. Wolf halted and tried to get his breath. He was dead with fatigue and stress, but this man must be vanquished.

The blond raised his pistol, sighted carefully,

and fired once more. He stood for one terrible instant, gazing at this deathless wolf and knowing from his grandmother's stories what it must be. Then deliberately he clamped his teeth on the muzzle of the automatic and fired again.

Wolf had not yet eaten in his wolf's body, but food must have been transferred from the human stomach to the lupine. There was at least enough for him to be extensively sick.

Getting down the ladder was impossible. He jumped. He had never heard anything about a wolf's landing on his feet, but it seemed to work. He dragged his weary and bruised body along to where Emily sat by the still unconscious Pasty-face, his discarded pistol in her hand. She wavered as the wolf approached her, as though uncertain yet as to whether he was friend or foe.

Time was short. With the machine gun dead, Fergus and his companions would be invading the Temple at any minute. Wolf hurriedly nosed about and found the planchette of the Ouija board. He pushed the heart-shaped bit of wood onto the board and began to shove it around with his paw.

Emily watched, intent and puzzled. "A," she said aloud. "B—S—"

Wolf finished the word and edged around so that he stood directly beside one of the ceremonial robes. "Are you trying to say something?" Emily frowned.

Wolf wagged his tail in vehement affirmation and began again.

"A—" Emily repeated. "B—S—A—R—"

He could already hear approaching footsteps.

"—K—A— What on earth does that mean? *Absarka—*"

Ex-professor Wolfe Wolf hastily wrapped his naked human body in the cloak of the Dark Truth. Before either he or Emily knew quite what was happening, he had folded her in his arms, kissed her in a most thorough expression of gratitude, and fainted.

Even Wolf's human nose could tell, when he awakened, that he was in a hospital. His body was still limp and exhausted. The bare patch on his neck, where the policeman had pulled out the hair, still stung, and there was a lump where the butt of the automatic had connected. His tail, or where his tail had been, sent twinges through him if he moved. But the sheets were cool and he was at rest and Emily was safe.

"I don't know how you got in there, Mr. Wolf, or what you did; but I want you to know you've done your country a signal service." It was the moonfaced giant speaking.

Fergus O'Breen was sitting beside the bed, too. "Congratulations, Wolf. And I don't know if the doctor would approve, but here."

Wolfe Wolf drank the whiskey gratefully and looked a question at the huge man.

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Detective Story

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

"This is Moon Lafferty," said Fergus. "F. B. I. man. He's been helping me track down this ring of spies ever since I first got wind of them."

"You got them—all?" Wolf asked.

"Picked up Fearing and Garton at the hotel," Lafferty rumbled.

"But how— I thought—"

"You thought we were out for you?" Fergus answered. "That was the Garton's idea, but I didn't quite tumble. You see, I'd already talked to your secretary. I knew it was Fearing she'd wanted to see. And when I asked around about Fearing, and learned of the Temple and the defense researches of some of its members, the whole picture cleared up."

"Wonderful work, Mr. Wolf," said Lafferty. "Any time we can do anything for you— And how you got into that machine-gun turret— Well, O'Breen, I'll see you later. Got to check up on the rest of this roundup. Pleasant convalescence to you, Wolf."

Fergus waited until the G-man had left the room. Then he leaned over the bed and asked confidentially, "How about it, Wolf? Going back to your acting career?"

Wolf gasped. "What acting career?"

"Still going to play Tookah? If Metropolis makes 'Fangs' with Miss Garton in a Federal prison."

Wolf fumbled for words. "What sort of nonsense—"

"Come on, Wolf. It's pretty clear I know that much. Might as well tell me the whole story."

Still dazed, Wolf told it. "But how in Heaven's name did you know it?" he concluded.

Fergus grinned. "Look. Dorothy Sayers said some place that in a detective story the supernatural may be introduced only to be dispelled. Sure, that's swell. Only in real life there come times when it won't be dispelled. And this was one. There was too damned much. There were your eyebrows and fingers, there were the obviously real magical powers of your friend, there were the tricks which no dog could possibly do without signals, there was the way the other dogs whimpered and cringed— I'm pretty hard-headed, Wolf, but I'm Irish. I'll string along only so far with the materialistic, but too much coincidence is too much."

"Fearing believed it, too," Wolf reflected. "But one thing that worries me—if they used a silver bullet on me once, why were all the rest of them lead? Why was I safe from then on?"

"Well," said Fergus, "I'll tell you. Because it wasn't 'they' who fired the silver bullet. You see, Wolf, up till the last minute I thought you were on 'their' side. I, somehow, didn't associate good will with a werewolf. So I got a mold from a gunsmith and paid a visit to a jeweler and— I'm damned glad I missed," he added sincerely.

"You're glad!"

"But look. Previous question stands. Are you going back to acting? Because if not, I've got a suggestion."

"Which is?"

"You say you fretted about how to be a practical, commercial werewolf. All right. You're strong and fast. You can terrify people even to committing suicide. You can overhear conversations that no human being could get in on. You're invulnerable to bullets. Can you tell me better qualifications for a G-man?"

Wolf goggled. "Me? A G-man?"

"Moon's been telling me how badly they need new men. They've changed the qualifications lately so that your language knowledge'll do instead of the law or accounting they used to require. And, after what you did today, there won't be any trouble about a little academic scandal in your past. Moon's pretty sold on you."

Wolf was speechless. Only three days ago he had been in torment because he was not an actor or a G-man. Now—

"Think it over," said Fergus.

"I will. Indeed I will. Oh, and one other thing. Has there been any trace of Ozzy?"

"Nary a sign."

"I like that man. I've got to try to find him and—"

"If he's the magician I think he is, he's staying up there only because he decided he likes it."

"I don't know. Magic's tricky. Heaven knows I've learned that. I'm going to try to do my damnedest for that fringe-bearded old colleague."

"Wish you luck. Shall I send in your other guest?"

"Who's that?"

"Your secretary. Here on business, no doubt."

Fergus disappeared discreetly as he admitted Emily. She walked over to the bed and took Wolf's hand. His eyes drank in her quiet, charming simplicity, and his mind wondered what freak of belated adolescence had made him succumb to the blatant glamour of Gloria.

They were silent for a long time. Then at once they both said, "How can I thank you? You saved my life."

Wolf laughed. "Let's not argue. Let's say we saved our life."

"You mean that?" Emily asked gravely.

Wolf pressed her hand. "Aren't you tired of being an office wife?"

In the bazaar of Darjeeling, Chulundra Lingasuta stared at his rope in numb amazement. Young Ali had climbed up only five minutes ago, but now as he descended he was a hundred pounds heavier and wore a curious fringe of beard.

THE END.

THE ROOM

By L. Ron Hubbard

● The old country doctor left a curious sort of heritage for his successor—a room, a private den. But the room was not bounded entirely by its four walls, roof and floor.

Illustrated by Orban

Uncle Toby disappeared.

He had gone into his room one evening and hadn't been seen after that by anyone, not even Gracie, his horse.

Aunt Cinthia was bustling about the huge farm kitchen, doing the wrong thing with the wrong pans and pausing every few seconds to wipe "the steam" out of her eyes and vigorously blow her red nose upon her apron. She was a gigantic woman and her heart was huge in proportion, but her feet got in each other's way and her hands were so strong that they sometimes crumpled up china at a touch. Before Uncle Toby had married her she had been worked like a draft animal on her brother's farm. Her brother was a first-generation American and saw nothing wrong with making a woman plow if the horses needed saving.

"It's not like him!" said Aunt Cinthia, honking

vigorously into her apron. "It ain't right for him to stay away so long. A week or ten days, that's maybe all right. But it's sixteen days and four hours! Joe, you don't . . . don't suppose something got him, do you? Some varmint, maybe?"

Joe shifted restively and knocked down his crutch. He was a quiet, usually cheerful boy and to see his "aunt" in such agony of suffering cut his nerves into little slivers. Joe had never seen Aunt Cinthia so upset and it had been brought home to him in the last few days just how deeply this tall, clumsy woman loved Uncle Toby. Ever since he was three Joe had been living with them, himself an orphan after a prairie fire got his parents, and he could not recall either of them ever showing any great affection. They never rowed together and they never said sweet things, either. They were just sort of—well—comfortable.

Uncle Toby, of course, was a very brainy man. He had studied at the State University, had graduated high as a veterinary and was forever reading books on all sorts of subjects. Naturally, Aunt Cinthia, who couldn't read, had no truck with books and so had little conversationally in common with Uncle Toby. Uncle Toby had rescued her, he had cared for her, he was her mainstay, her world, her idol. She never said anything about it. Sometimes her eyes had said things when Uncle Toby wasn't looking. But the way she was broken by this circumstance unnerved Joe.

Joe, well as he was able, had been out and around looking casually. It was hard for him to cover much territory for there wasn't much of his right leg and twenty-three years had not hung much fat on him. Pallid to transparency, frail and wistful and quiet, Joe had been too shy to ask the sheriff to let him join in the general hunt. Joe had poked into a few culverts and looked in a few bushes and had ridden Uncle Toby's mare, Gracie, all the way over to the hill. But he hadn't found any sign of Uncle Toby.

The sheriff hadn't found any sign, either. Neither had the other farmers and villagers. They all had liked Uncle Toby. He had taken care of their stock and, often, their children and wives and it simply wasn't reasonable that Uncle Toby and Palmerville could run separately.

The circumstances had been mysterious. About nine, sixteen days before, with the summer twilight fading out, Uncle Toby had come in the house. He had refused a cup of coffee and had gone straight to his room. He had shut the door as he always did. The next morning the door to the room was still shut. But Uncle Toby had not been in there. However, Joe and Aunt Cinthia had not found out about that for three days.

This room of Uncle Toby's was an inviolable sanctuary. The bushy-headed old man would often stay in there reading for two days at a stretch, living either on nothing or on some of the canned goods he always kept in a cupboard. That was a clear and usual thing in this old farmhouse and nobody thought there was anything strange in it, it had been going on for so long.

Once Aunt Cinthia had thought she had heard some loud voices in that room, but just Uncle Toby came out and she forgot about it, not being a curious sort of person.

The room opened off the parlor. The old house had grown up from a sod hut and had been added to as the years had gone along until it was a pile of rooms. No architect could have mapped from the outside just how Uncle Toby's room fitted into the scheme. But it was there, in defiance of architecture.

It was never cleaned. When she had first come to this place, Aunt Cinthia had started to clean it and in a very quiet voice Uncle Toby had told her not to touch it again ever. And so she had never touched it again ever. There was a potbellied stove in the middle of it, a sand box muchly missed beside the stove. There was a long rack full of medical books and another case full of other kinds of books. There was a big roll-top desk, but the cover had not been down for years, because there were too many papers on it to let the cover close. There were some pictures on the walls too thickly cased in dust to be recognized and there were some nicknacks sitting on a side table and in a cabinet. There was a case of instruments and a mysterious black box which contained something electrical to accomplish something medical. The carpet was either red or green; the fact was uncertain.

Uncle Toby had not been seen coming out of his room. Gracie, the mare, was still in her stall. Nobody had phoned. And the fairs wouldn't begin for another month. Uncle Toby had just plain disappeared.

Sometimes he had taken trips which had begun with a call. He would go doctor somebody's pigs and the somebody would be going over to see somebody else and Uncle Toby would go along and spend the night and then go see somebody else and after having toured the whole country and having seen nearly everyone in it he would come home, ten days late, hang up his hat, put away his instrument case and wash his hands for supper just as though he had left that morning.

But Uncle Toby hadn't taken Gracie and Uncle Toby hated to walk. Nobody had been visited by him. He had simply vanished, leaving a hole in Palmerville which nobody else could ever begin to fill. Uncle Toby's white, bushy head and his warm, blue eyes didn't turn up this time.

Jeb, the hired man, came in to supper and the three sat down in the kitchen and ate. There

were towers of food. There was little eaten. Jeb didn't even clean his plate.

"What do you think, Jeb?" pleaded Aunt Cinthia.

Jeb judicially picked his teeth and gazed with washed-out eyes at the beam ceiling. He shook his head.

"Do you think he drowned, maybe?" said Aunt Cinthia.

Jeb shook his head again. He started to say something, then paused. He picked at a scrap of meat that was wedged in his spraddled teeth. He recrossed his legs. He shook his head again, After a little the strain got too great and he leaped up, jammed on his hat and stomped outside. There was a clang as he kicked a milk bucket off the back porch.

"I looked all over—far as I could," said Joe.

"Yes, Joe. I know you did," said Aunt Cinthia.

"I would have looked a lot farther only—" He glanced at his crutch with a scowl.

"You did all right, Joe."

"I . . . I didn't do enough," said Joe.

"There, there, Joe. Now don't you go breaking down. I'm a woman. I got a right to. But don't you. Joe—"

"Yes, Aunt Cinthia?"

"Joe, we got to admit it. I had a horrible dream. I am ashamed to think it, but I had a terrible nightmare. I got to admit it, Joe. We . . . we won't see Uncle Toby again."

Joe sat quietly, looking at his untouched plate. He shifted his gaze to his pale hands and then under the table to his twisted leg. He sat still for a long time.

"Aunt Cinthia—"

"Yes, Joe?"

"I been studying with Uncle Toby a long time. I know a lot of things now. I'm going to take his place as well as I can."

"No! You aren't strong!"

"Maybe I can make up with this what I lack there." And he touched his head and indicated his leg. "We've got to keep eating, Aunt Cinthia."

"The farm—"

"Never brings in any cash. I'll figure out—" He lifted his head and listened to a rig roll up. He gathered his crutch under his armpit and went to the door.

A big man, plump and friendly, shook Joe's hand and came in. "Howdy, Mrs. Cinthia."

"Mr. Dawson!" said Aunt Cinthia. She was a little overcome because Mr. Dawson was the biggest lawyer in the county and had once been a representative in the State legislature. "Sit down!"

Mr. Dawson bowed and sat down. "You are looking prettier than ever these days, Mrs. Cinthia," said Mr. Dawson.

Aunt Cinthia blushed and got Mr. Dawson some coffee.

"You look right well, Joe," said Mr. Dawson.

"Thank you," said Joe. "I'm going to give this crutch to Jeb for toothpicks one of these days. You'll see."

"Good spirit," said Mr. Dawson. He drank his coffee and gradually became forlorn of countenance to prepare them for his business. After a long time he looked fixedly at Aunt Cinthia.

"I came here to do some business for Toby," said Mr. Dawson. He was sure of their attention and went on. "A long time ago, Toby came to me and told me that he wanted to leave his will with me."

Aunt Cinthia blew her nose on her apron and managed to stifle the sobs which welled up in her. "Uncle Toby was a good man, Mr. Dawson."

"The whole country around and about couldn't have been wrong," said Mr. Dawson. "He was a very fine man. He told me that one of these days he might not turn up alive in the morning, and so he thought I had better take care of things for him. Of course, he isn't legally dead. Won't be for years. But that was his wish that the will would be read if he was gone as long as fifteen days. It is, I believe, sixteen since last he was seen."

Aunt Cinthia swallowed hard. Joe rattled his crutch and cleared his throat.

"So he gave me this will of his. I'm not going to pester you with legal terms. I'm going to tell you what it says. He leaves to you, Mrs. Cinthia, as his wife, the whole farm and all and any of his property. He didn't have any money to leave. All his property except one thing and that he leaves to Joe."

Joe looked wonderingly at Mr. Dawson. Uncle Toby didn't have any property except the farm and a few clothes and his instruments.

"To you," said Mr. Dawson, "Toby leaves his room."

"What?" said Joe.

"He leaves his room and everything in it," said Mr. Dawson, "to you on the condition that you keep it more or less as it is, that you allow no one else in it for any length of time and that you absolutely forbid and enforce the law that it is not to be cleaned. He said a man needs a place to crawl off. And be all by himself and think things out. And so he leaves you his room. That's all there is in the will."

Aunt Cinthia began to weep and kept on weeping even after Mr. Dawson had gone. Joe sat in front of the stove until nearly midnight. Until that will had been read he had had some faint hope. But now it became a certain fact that he would never again see Uncle Toby, never again hear him chuckle, never again be given a new book with heavily underscored lines.

The next afternoon Joe limped into the house, more weary and discouraged than ever before in his life. He did not feel like hitching himself any farther than the kitchen, but he could not endure, he realized suddenly, the inquiring and sad eyes of Aunt Cinthia. Joe bethought himself of the room, and, saying nothing, dragged himself through the parlor, thrust the door shut and sank down in Uncle Toby's—now Joe's—chair.

For a little while he didn't look at anything. But as the gloom rested his eyes and the coolness caressed his brow he pulled papers out of his pocket and threw them on the desk.

Those bills were worthless. In two places Joe had brought himself to ask for money only to find the subject slid away unremarked and some ailing pigs substituted. Joe had not collected any money. But he had treated the pigs. This mass of paper represented a lifetime of unpaid work. Lunches, seed, harness buckles, night lodgings, a few fresh vegetables and odds and ends had been the only pay Uncle Toby had ever collected so far as Joe could see.

He sat there and looked at his twisted leg. Uncle Toby had kept the farmers of this county in solvency by keeping their stock in good condition and the farmers of this county had never done anything tangible for Uncle Toby. That had become very plain.

Joe wondered if he would feel such a responsibility to the community that he would keep on as Uncle Toby had. But Uncle Toby had never mentioned money to Joe and evidently had never asked anyone for money and yet Uncle Toby had been contented and cheerful. There was a puzzle here.

Was service to the community enough recompense?

Joe absently took a pipe out of his pocket and spent some time fumbling for his tobacco before he remembered that he had, that day, run out. On the chance that there was some in the room he looked about, got up and approached the cabinet.

He had never been in here more than twice and then he had not seen anything strange. But these little boxes and vials, all so artfully done, carved and molded were far from usual. They seemed to be empty, most of them, and their shapes and purposes defied speculation. They were pretty. That was all. One jar was heavy and Joe lifted the lid to find his tobacco. The aroma was pleasantly fresh, a little sweet and recalled nostalgically, Uncle Toby. Joe spilled a few crumbs filling his pipe and these mingled with what had been spilled when he had lifted off the lid. The container was heavy pottery and the lid was the cap of a clown.

Joe sat down and picked up a big match. He dodged back, startled, for the thing had lighted as soon as he brought it near his pipe. He picked it up from where he had dropped it and shakily applied the flame. It was a most curious circumstance. There were many other matches, similar to it, in the alabaster hand which served as a holder and Joe picked up another one. As he brought it near his pipe it did not light. Nor would it light when he scratched it under the desk. The stove door was open to furnish a draft of cool air and Joe threw the match into it. As soon as it struck the grate it lighted.

But Joe was too weary to speculate much. He was tired. Terribly, sickeningly tired. The hot sun, the smell of the sties, the long ride in the jolting buggy had been more exertion than he had had in many months. Such activity was strictly against Uncle Toby's orders.

There was a tall bottle, glitteringly cut with faces, standing on the top of the roll-top desk. The amber in it looked as though it would pick a man out of his blues and Joe poured a liberal potion into a matching glass. The bottle had been full to the cork and for a little while, as he sipped his drink, he did not notice that the bottle was still full. When he did notice he put down the glass as though it had scorched him. He sat for a short time and then poured another potion. The bottle was still full.

He corked it tightly and turned it around and around in his hands while the little glass faces seemed to smile companionably at him. This was very excellent, but very ordinary bourbon, and this seemed to be a wholly sane bottle. Joe put it back. He felt a little tingle at the back of his neck.

Not so tired now, he began to sense this room. Once before he had noticed that a deep and quiet peace filled the place, that no harsh sounds came here, that it was cool when the day was hot and warm when the wintery blasts chilled the plains. And now he felt that abiding sense of safety and well-being once more.

Maybe it was because Uncle Toby had been so calm, so cheerful. Maybe he had left that impression in this place.

Cautiously, Joe resumed his drink and, as the languorous minutes went by, emptied it.

He was startled into chattering terror when the bottle swooped down and filled the glass again of its own accord. But plucking up courage he took the bottle in hand, found no strings or mechanisms and felt the tingle on the back of his neck grow. Still he could not be wholly afraid.

This time a tiny inscription caught his attention. Graven upon the glowing bottom of the bottle were the words:

To Uncle Toby
With blessings
From Princess Dundein

Joe read it over and over and set the bottle down to think, for he had never heard Uncle Toby mention anyone by the name of Princess Dundein. And the only princesses in Laudon County were show horses.

With no new thought after much effort, Joe got up and filled his pipe at the cabinet. Then he frowned and removed the clown's cap a second time. Yes, he was right! The tobacco jar was full again. He had used two pipes from it now and yet when the cap was pulled off the tobacco always spilled!

He looked carefully at the jar. The clown's face seemed to stretch into a wider smile. In gold, upon the side, was minutely written:

To my good friend Toby
From Ysytsfrau

Certainly no one by that name had ever come to Palmerville. And certainly Uncle Toby had never traveled to a land where such a word would be common.

Joe tucked his crutch tighter under his armpit and carefully put the jar back in its place. He could not be sure, but he was afraid the clown had winked at him.

There were other knicknacks now that he looked. From lord, king, duchess or ladies. And all to their dearest, or respected and admired Toby, or Uncle Toby. There was a perfume container which played music as it sprayed and made rainbows in its mist. There was a little ring which spread a sphere of light. There was an apple which, no matter how often or hard it was bitten or eaten, always remained itself. There was a little golden monkey which did tricks endlessly and wittily and finished up by grinning for applause and then resumed its metallic inanimacy. There was a book which read poetry aloud in a soothing, feminine voice and a little muzzein which called out a strange tongued phrase and turned ever in a certain direction no matter which way he was set down.

Joe grew tired. He could not be afraid of these things, they were all so cheerful and pleasant. Dazedly he went out to supper and heard not a word that Aunt Cinthia said.

Several days passed before Joe discovered anything further about the room.

He had found that persistence in driving about the country and working was being rewarded at least by gains in his own health for, though nothing could ever cure his twisted leg, sunshine and air could cure his pallor and association with many other people could gradually work away his shyness. He had promised to look again at the pigs he had treated and the second calls had resulted in further calls. Because there seemed to be very little he could do to escape, he found himself gradually coming into possession of Uncle Toby's wholly unremunerative practice.

As Joe explained it to Aunt Cinthia, "They ask and—well, it would be sort of insulting to Uncle Toby if I said 'no.'"

He had read and listened to Uncle Toby and had treated livestock himself, so it was not hard to keep up with these simple ailments. The farmers had always had considerable respect for his learning, judging from the correct use he made of speech. And the fact that he was treating living things seemed to react upon him as though he also treated himself. He could never part with his crutch, but the time came when he did not wince when he walked.

Aunt Cinthia was very quiet these days, her eyes lighting only when a step sounded upon the back porch—to darken when she discovered it was not Uncle Toby. She grew thin and preoccupied and the veins stuck out on her huge red hands and little spots of unnatural color stood high on her cheekbones in sharp contrast to the gray hollows below. Joe began to worry about her for it was very plain to him at least that Aunt Cinthia, inch by inch, was pulling a shroud over herself. But she would not talk very much and his presence did not seem to comfort her. More and more time he spent in Toby's room while Aunt Cinthia sat listlessly in the kitchen.

It was comforting to Joe to have a place into which he could crawl and where he could quietly think about things. And through the long days of driving and talking he always had a small part of his mind fixed upon the comfort and relief of the dim silence of the room.

With his crutch propped against the desk, Joe would lean back in the unstable chair and gaze at the knicknacks in the cabinet. He liked to puzzle upon their sources, upon the identities of the kings and lords and princesses and ladies who had so graciously inscribed them, and he began to build faces and manners to fit the names and gifts. It never actually occurred to Joe that he might encounter the sources.

Perhaps he would have gone on pondering the matter for years if, one day, he had not forgotten to tell Aunt Cinthia in passing that Mrs. Barthlomew had said she would send over a cake. Joe had come straight to the room, and closed the door and had seated himself at the desk. And then he remembered.

With a sigh he picked up his crutch again, hauled himself to his feet and went back to the door. He opened it and walked out.

For ten steps at least he was blinded by preoccupation. He did not notice that he was not walking through the parlor until he moved aside

to pass the center table. The center table was not there!

The greenish light about him startled him. He looked up and gazed a limitless distance through green water. He looked down and saw that he stood upon current-smoothed coral. He looked around and saw that he was in an undersea garden where tall green plumes swept gracefully from side to side in slow motion and where gay little fish lurked nervously behind the colorful pinnacles of rock.

In a sudden panic Joe stumped in a half circle and tried to regain the door. It was there. The room was beyond it, clearly visible.

Joe was afraid to breathe. The solidity of the water did not seem to interfere with his return. He gained the door and slammed it shut, standing there with his back against it for a long time, trying to regain his composure.

The curiousness of the situation was a long time in coming to him and then he began to be interested in the defiance of the law of physics. The water had not flowed into this place at all. That heartened him. That made things seem better, somehow. That gave the water a friendly and thoughtful aspect.

Cautiously, Joe opened the door a crack. He peeked out. But no undersea garden was there now. There was the organ, there were the album and the Bible, there were the false flowers under their glass domes and the clock which wouldn't run. It was the parlor again.

Joe closed the door, waited a moment and again opened it. The parlor was still there.

That night at supper it was on his lips to tell Aunt Cinthia about this singular circumstance, but, on considering, he decided that it would only worry her, and so kept his own counsel. Jeb picked his teeth with thoroughness; Aunt Cinthia cleared away the dishes. Nobody said anything.

Jeb finished picking his teeth and went out to admire the night. Joe rubbed his palm thoughtfully against the top of his crutch and listened to the dishes rattling in the sink.

Three nights passed before Joe received any other surprises in Uncle Toby's room. He had nearly given up hope, for once his initial fear had vanished he had found in himself a considerable thirst for further investigation into that undersea garden. Each evening he had closed the door to quickly open it again. Each evening he had been greeted by the musty staleness of the parlor.

He began to get exasperated.

And then, when his patience was translucent with thinness, he determined that he would not further investigate. On this evening he came into the room, closed the door, eased himself into the chair and placed his crutch against the desk. He took a long breath and let his nerves relax. He looked at the door with a grimace and refused to be lured for he knew that if he again opened it he would find only the parlor, the organ, the album, the Bible and the glass domes over the artificial flowers. He settled himself to think about the strange ailment which had taken possession of Mr. Carmody's prize stallion and the unanswerable listlessness which had overcome George Stockwell's cow.

The bottle swept down off the desk top and poured out a glass. Joe ignored it. The monkey went through an exhausting series of convulsions and Joe paid no heed. The book persisted in reading poetry and he dropped it into a drawer from which came out muffled and plaintive tones as soon as it was closed.

He would not be lured and laughed at.

But within a few minutes he was at the door, hand on the knob, pulling it open.

The light, hot and golden, blinded him. He blinked at the smoldering wastes which stretched rollingly away to a cluster of scrawny palms and at the gas-flame sky from which scorched down a high-noon equatorial sun.

Joe hitched his crutch close into his armpit and went a few steps in the yielding sand. The dunes before him made small mountains and deep valleys and ten thousand glass snakes writhed in a quiet dance.

The door was behind him. It, with its casement, stood all by itself.

Joe went up the side of a dune with great difficulty and stood looking into the depression beyond, not much surprised to see a small party of horsemen there at the head of a laden camel train.

The leader raised his gun in salute and Joe raised his crutch. The horses spurted into a gallop and labored up the slope, sinking to the knee in loose sand at each lunge.

"Hello," said the leader. He was swarthy and his light-blue eyes contrasted weirdly with his complexion. He rested his rifle across the pommel of his silver-worked saddle and threw back the hood of his djellaba.

"Hello," said Joe.

"Where is Uncle Toby?" said the leader.

"I was going to ask you," said Joe.

"You mean he is gone somewhere?"

"He has been gone for a long time," said Joe.

The leader turned to the curtained box which rode the back of a big, white camel. "He says Uncle Toby is gone."

A pair of eyes, lighter and bluer than the leader's, looked carefully through a slit in the finely brocaded cloth. "Where did he go?" said a soft, woman's voice.

"He says he doesn't know," stated the leader.

There was a sigh. And then the eyes played

with interest on Joe. It was a new experience for Joe to find himself looked at without any trace of pity.

The woman said, "Leave the things, anyway. You, what is his name, Abd?"

"Joe," said Joe.

"You will be back again, Joe?" said the woman.

"Yes," said Joe.

"Leave him the things, Abd. Tell him if he sees Uncle Toby to tell him we will miss him."

"She says that we miss Uncle Toby and she is right," the leader told Joe.

Three riders swung down and took a small silver box and a red satin bag from the camel packs. They carried these to the door and put them down. They bowed very low to Joe and mounted again.

The leader saluted. The woman waved. The cavalcade moved briskly away.

Joe stood there for a little while with the hot desert wind drying out his skin. Then he went back and picked up the silver box and the red satin bag. He went through the door and closed it behind him.

For a little while he stood looking at the room and thinking about Uncle Toby and then from somewhere came the dinner gong which Aunt Cinthia was ringing for Jeb to come up from the evening chores.

Joe put the silver box on the top of the cabinet. He put his hand into the silken bag and pulled out a heavy weight of coins. He looked at them, jingling them on his palm, not much surprised to find it was perfectly good money.

He put the coins into his pocket and opened the door. The parlor was dim and stale and the crayon portrait of Uncle Toby on the wall looked stiffly at him. Joe could not be sure about the smile he felt had crossed the picture.

When he sat down to the table, Jeb was already eating, with some slight suction. Aunt Cinthia piled mashed potatoes on Joe's plate and gave him a slab of meat.

Aunt Cinthia, as time flowed onward, drew more and more from her own company until she seemed to wear a cloak of silence through which nothing could penetrate. Methodically and tiredly she went on with her endless tasks, bending her tallness over tubs and sink and stove.

She gradually developed a strange fascination for sunsets, standing on the porch each evening to watch the great globe halve, quarter and vanish behind the prairie rim. There seemed to be considerable satisfaction for her in thus watching the days vanish one by one, to see the changes of winter into spring, spring into summer, summer into fall and fall again into winter. And as time went by, Joe began to notice that the only hope in her eyes shone there in the brief moment of the dying light.

It was not much of a surprise to Joe, then, when he came one dusky winter evening up the road to the house and found Aunt Cinthia sitting relaxed and apparently quite comfortably upon the back porch, oblivious to the severe chill in the wind. He spoke to her and shook her shoulder.

When her head fell back, Joe found himself looking into her peaceful eyes. Aunt Cinthia was dead.

Palmerville and Laudon County had very little to say about it. People went to the funeral and said the properly doleful things to Joe and then for a few Sundays after remarked the clean whiteness of the new cross in the church yard. Then they forgot about her.

Joe kept on doctoring pigs, driving around the country, speaking pleasantly to everyone and leaning easily upon his crutch. Joe never talked about himself or what he did, but that was all right for other people were too willing to talk about themselves and didn't notice. Nobody paid Joe. Everyone depended upon him and respected what he said. Nobody had anything to do with a new veterinary from State who tried to hang up a shingle in Palmerville. Joe was part of the community like the church steeple and the old elm at the end of the bridge.

But things change even in places like Palmerville. Things change and things happen.

Jeb, an old man now, came into town one morning with the news that Joe had vanished.

People were excited about it for a little while and went looking under bushes and culverts and not much work was done for three days.

And then something else happened. Joe's house, without cause, caught on fire and burned right to the foundation to leave two chimneys sticking up out of charcoal like a pair of self-appointed sentries.

Nobody rebuilt the house. Nobody ever found Joe.

Five or six years later when a farmer, who had gotten rich, decided he had better atone for some things he maybe shouldn't have done, work was started on a new church to replace the old frame building which had weathered so much petty sin. The work necessitated the moving of a few graves, and among those was that where Aunt Cinthia had been buried.

The workmen very nearly had the coffin buried again when one fellow, more observant than the rest, discovered that the coffin was empty.

People talked about it for a little while and then, because babies were getting born and crops had to be sown and reaped and chores had to be done, forgot about that, also.

THE END.

CENSUS TAKER

By Frank Belknap Long

● The thing seemed logical and reasonable enough—a census taker isn't ordinarily any other than a normal man. But this one—had strange ideas, strange ways—

Illustrated by Edd Cartier

The little man standing in the doorway was dripping wet. He had come in out of the rain with a portfolio clutched under his arm and an expression on his face which was the opposite of placid. There was apology in his gaze, and yet he seemed to be fuming with indignation, and he kept glancing back over his shoulder as though he had encountered something outrageous in the vestibule which was still plucking at his nerves.

"I couldn't find the whistle," he said.

Phillip glowered, and looked him up and down. Phillip had been reading a detective novel, with his long legs spread out before a bright, crackling fire. The fire had given him a sense of tingling security and warmth. Everything had been shut out except the juicy murder on Page 19. Everything—the rain outside, the legal papers in his study, the unpaid bills in his household file, and even his indigestion.

Then had come the tapping, and the corpse on Page 19 had dwindled to a meaningless jumble of print which some third-rate writer had sprinkled with the magic of illusion while sweating out his guts at night.

The little man was clad from his chin to his shoes in a pale-green raincoat. He was hatless and his hair clung in soggy strands to his brow.

Funny thing about the raincoat—it had no buttons. It resembled one of those smart zipper topcoats which overlap on the outside, deceiving everyone but the wearer and making tailors glare.

Phillip stepped back from the door and waved the little man toward the fireplace. He wanted to push him back into the rain, and shut the door in his face. But there was a faint aura of official business about him which was as chilling as a letter from the department of taxation and finance in Washington.

The little man's apologetic manner diminished perceptibly the instant he sat down in Phillip's favorite lounge chair. He held his hands out to the fire, and smiled.

"A nice place you've got here," he said.

Phillip sat down opposite him, and lit a cigarette, his jaw muscles twitching. An income-tax investigator? Phillip hoped not. He had leaned backward in making out his return, but—

"I can't understand it," the little man said. "I was sure I had covered this district from the flats to the canal. It just goes to prove that a man is only as good as his eyes. I walked past this corner last week, and not a house did I see. Not one blessed house."

Phillip gulped. "Are you a . . . a building inspector?" he ventured.

"Dear me, no. I'm taking a census of all the people in this district. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you some very personal questions, sir. About your wives. Just how many have you, sir?"

Phillip's jaw jiggled downward, and his cigarette fell to the floor. He retrieved it, a slow flush mounting up over his face. A lunatic! Not an income-tax investigator, but a raving lunatic sitting there opposite him.

"It's a nice place you've got here," the little man reiterated, staring about him admiringly. "I've never seen a fireplace quite like that, and these chairs—antiques, of course. Bless my soul, where did you pick up that rug?"

With lunatics you had to be careful. It was best to humor them, pretend to agree with them one hundred percent.

Phillip's jaw was rigid now. Pretending wasn't going to be easy. His heart had started pounding, and his throat felt dry and tight.

"I've been expecting you to call," he said. The steadiness of his own voice surprised him. "I'm afraid I haven't even one wife. You see—"

The little man leaped up with a startled cry. "Not *one* wife! But you couldn't . . . you couldn't pay that kind of tax."

"I'm not paying any tax," Phillip said.

"Not *any* tax. But it's the law. If you have fewer than twenty wives you have to pay a tax.

With ten it's steep, with five . . . you're not paying *any* tax?"

"Well, now, you see—"

The little man was staring at Phillip as though his stomach had been turned by some inferior brand of worm. "No wonder you've shut yourself away in this lonely old house. No whistle—I might have known."

"No—whistle?"

"No door whistle. It's outrageous. Callers have to knock." The little man's lips began to twitch. "The law will have something to say about this, sir. Not *one* wife. Why, you're a criminal, sir—a felon."

Phillip was edging away from the little man cautiously. He was too frightened to retreat in haste. He had read somewhere that homicidal maniacs had the strength and agility of twenty men. The strength, anyway.

He didn't intend to take any chances. Like most neurotics he had plenty of courage on tap, but the spigot was clogged now, bunged up tight.

His objective was the telephone on the left side of the entrance hall. When he reached the telephone he would block off the living room by sliding the big, double— His thoughts congealed in whorllike splotches on the panes of his consciousness.

The little man was gone. He had vanished so quickly that the space he had occupied had a *sucked-in* look.

Phillip tottered to the fireplace and stood staring down into the flames. He was shaken to the core of his being. He had never before had a bona-fide hallucination. Three or four times in his life he had awakened from sleep to confront a solid, menacing something at the foot of his bed, but the horror had fled before he could switch on the lights.

The little man hadn't fled. He had sat in Phillip's chair and talked, and displayed emotion, and even stormed about with a notebook clutched in his hand. The penumbra of a nightmare would have shunned such a test, would have darted into shadows with a spine-chilling swish.

Phillip mopped sweat from his brow. He had gone to the door, and *let the hallucination in.* It couldn't be just a nervous upset. A hallucination of hearing, sight, smell that spouted gibberish could only mean that—

He had only one sinking straw to cling to. The borderline could be crossed and recrossed a dozen times in the incipient stages before they measured you for a strait jacket, and started the water running.

He saw himself in a tub, with hot water swirling up over his chest and the little man installed as a permanent guest in a cobwebby room with cracked walls deep inside his head.

The water rose and rose, and when he couldn't stand it any longer he went out into the hall and dialed Claire's number on a swanky, white-enameled handset which the telephone company had installed at his expense. Claire had wanted him to have nice things in his house because she was going to be his wife and live in it until the frosts came.

He was sorry now he hadn't told the little man about Claire. He might have skimmed a cool million from the tax. Claire was a brainy, sympathetic girl, and—

"Claire? . . . Darling, I've had a jolt. I'm frightened. Can you come over right away? . . . What, dear? . . . Yes, I know it's late. But you said if we should ever really need each other you'd dump Mrs. Grundy in a ditch. I need you now."

"Phillip, what is it?" Claire gasped. "Are you ill? Phillip, you haven't been—"

"I'm sober, Claire. I . . . I haven't touched a drop. Not since last night."

"All right, dearest. Pour yourself a stiff one, and sit tight. Whatever it is, we'll show it we're tough."

"Claire, you're a brick. A beautiful, golden, loyal, wonderful brick."

"Phillip, how nice. A brick—"

When Phillip hung up the horror seemed to lift a little. He went back to the fire and sat down. He was still trembling, but Claire's voice had helped him. With Claire in his arms he could face even a—a psychosis.

Face it, bring it out into the light. His neuroticism had boiled over, but he wasn't licked yet. Not by a damned sight. A man with a lot to live for could fight his way back. Back through festering dark mazes to the borderland, where just one little man stood. He'd knock the man down, and climb back to the uplands of sanity with Claire in his arms. He'd fight, fight—

Someone was knocking, pounding on the front door of Phillip's big, lonely house. He stiffened galvanically, a band of ice tightening about his heart. It had to be the little man again, knocking out there in the rain, furious because he couldn't find the whistle. It had to be. Claire would have pulled the big, rusty doorbell and waited for the jangling to subside.

Phillip arose with his fists clenched, and a defiant glitter in his eyes. He'd fight it on his feet. He'd throw the door wide, and confront the little man with—

The four men must have come right through the door, because all at once the knocking stopped and there they were, their pale-green raincoats glistening in the firelight and their eyes riveted on his face.

They were not little men at all. Apart from circus giants, they were quite the biggest men he had ever seen. Six feet eight at least, with oxlike necks, and broad, straight shoulders.

Terror pumped all of Phillip's courage out of his body, and whisked it away out of sight.

"You gonna come quietly, or do we hafta use a persuader?" one of the giants said.

"Come quietly? Who are you? What have I done?"

"Macilrimp, he wan'sta know what he's done. You tell him. I ain't got the heart."

The giant on Phillip's right had an in-between kind of countenance. Something had stopped the lower part of his face from becoming as refined as his nose and forehead, which were about on the Cro-Magnon level. He was as bald as a cucumber, but his eyebrows were bushy mats, and his Heidelberg jaw was fringed with bronze-red bristles which quivered when he spoke.

"You know why we're here," he said. "Our orders are to lock you up. With a big house like this you could have upward of thirty wives. With all this space, what could you lose?"

"A misfit like him would have everything to lose," said the giant on Phillip's left. "It's easy to see he's an antisocial type."

"Stow the fancy gab, and take him," said the giant who had spoken first.

They closed in on him from four sides, their eyes blazing with scorn, and their massive jaws outthrust.

Phillip fought with all his strength. He struck out with his fists, and writhed, kicked, bit. But he couldn't seem to stop them from pinning his ears back, and lifting him into the air.

His fists were practically useless because when he hit them his knuckles bounced back into his face. There was a rubbery resilience in their weaving bulks which resisted all his pommelings. Or nearly all. For one brief instant he did seem to have the upper hand. That was when he drove an exceptionally vicious left into the pit of Macilrimp's stomach, and his hand stayed embedded, right up to his wrist.

Macilrimp seemed as surprised as Phillip when that happened. He dropped his arms, and stared down at his middle with consternation pulling at his mouth, and making his eyebrows twitch.

It was an advantage, but Phillip was too startled to follow it up. Instead of unlimbering an equally vicious right, he jerked his hand back as if he had thrust it by accident into a hornets' nest, or parked it on a red-hot stove.

Macilrimp's dented stomach filled out, and the crinkles vanished from his raincoat. He grabbed Phillip, and started mashing in his face, his expression homicidal.

"You asked for this," he snarled. "I'm gonna cripple you for life."

It took the giants a full minute to persuade Phillip that he was no match for their combined strength, even though he could sink his fists right into them with soggy plops.

Holding him by his arms and legs they carried him out of the big, lonely house into the night. His face looked as though a child's toy scooter had passed over it, and when the door opened and the rain came down on him each drop felt like a leaden weight descending.

"A man with wives and kids shouldn't have to tangle with these low types," grumbled Macilrimp.

Phillip didn't see Claire approaching, or hear her quick little footsteps pattering on the driveway which encircled the house. But he did hear her scream.

It was a scream of piercing fright, and it jolted Phillip from the despairing lethargy into which he had fallen. He started to struggle again, violently.

Macilrimp jerked at his ankle. "Be quiet, you hear?"

"Phillip, Phillip!" Claire shrieked. "Police, police, police!"

"Poor girl," grunted Macilrimp. "I guess she was hoping he'd marry her. I'll take *both* his legs, Sinsanawan. Explain to her how it is."

"You bet I will, Macilrimp."

The giant who had been holding Phillip's right foot, let go with a gusty sigh. The rain swallowed him.

"Claire, run," Phillip screamed. "Don't let him touch you."

His warning was of no avail. Claire's screams ceased so abruptly it could only mean she had been silenced by force. In a frenzy of despair he twisted his head about and sank his teeth into a soggy wrist.

The giant's flesh had no more consistency than butter, but he seemed to feel pain. He let go of Phillip's shoulders, and screeched like a gutted wild cat.

Phillip never knew what hit him. He saw the giant's body straighten, but he never knew at all. Before he could kick out at Macilrimp, something heavy descended on his skull, stunning him, blotting all awareness from his mind.

When consciousness returned, rain was still coming down into his face. But he was no longer staring up into the sky. He was inside a moving vehicle, sitting on the floor with his long legs spread out at right angles to his body. Directly opposite him was a built-in metal bench, running the length of the vehicle. He could tell by moving his shoulders that there was a similar bench behind him. High up on the opposite wall was a little square window, with bars on it.

Rain was coming in through the bars, and beating down into his face. He groaned, raised his right knee and pivoted about on his croup.

Claire was sitting beside him, but not on the floor. She was sitting on the bench, staring straight before her. Her pallor frightened Phillip, her eyes—she seemed not to see him at all.

He dragged himself toward her, wondering wildly if she had lost her mind. "Claire," he choked. "Claire, darling—"

She seemed not to hear him.

He clasped her firmly, and started shaking her, moving her rigid body to and fro on the bench. Her skin felt clammy, cold.

Suddenly her head moved, and she gripped his wrist. "Phillip, have you ever been so scared you couldn't move or speak? Something inside me that died came to life just now—when you opened your eyes. But I couldn't move a muscle. I couldn't move—"

Phillip started laughing. "Don't tell me. I want to guess. A muscle. You couldn't move a muscle."

He bent over, laughing. Great gusts of laughter shook him.

"Phillip, stop that. Phillip—"

She balled her hand and struck him on the jaw.

He stopped laughing abruptly. Wetness came into his eyes. "I'm sorry, Claire. I must have gone off the deep end. I thought we were tough. I thought we could take it. But even when we're together we're not so tough."

"Phillip, where are they taking us?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know at all. I thought at first I was—insane, Claire. I thought I was in the horrible dark, alone, and I couldn't stand it. I'm a rotten, stinking coward, Claire. I got you into this. They're real, and they're taking us somewhere to *lock us up.*"

Claire was shivering now. "That's what *he* said. He grabbed me by the waist and clamped his hand over my mouth. He said I should go down to the marriage bureau, and fill out a blank. He said you were not the marrying kind.

"I tried to struggle, but he just laughed. He said for an eighteen-year-old girl I 'sure had a lot of spunk.' Then he took his hand away for a minute, and asked me if I *was* eighteen. I knew that with crazy people you have to—"

"I know," Phillip said.

"I told him I was twenty-six. His face got tight and hard and he asked me why I wasn't married to a respectable man—a man with at least twenty wives. I tried to explain to him that polygamy was the opposite of respectable, except maybe in dreams, but he just glowered at me. Phillip, he told me that I was a low criminal and would have to be locked up."

Phillip screamed and flattened himself against the bench. The telephone pole had passed right through the vehicle, leaving a misty glimmering in its wake. Fortunately it had zigzagged, grazing Phillip's knees and not touching Claire at all.

Phillip sat very still for a long time, and all Claire did was gulp, and look at him.

The man must have been walking in the middle of the road, because he didn't zigzag. He whisked past Phillip with his chin thrust out and rain cascading from the brim of his hat.

It was horrible after that. A cemetery came in. That is to say, three or four tombstones skidded erratically between the benches, missing them by inches.

"We must have left the road," Phillip said.

"Have they shut us away together, deep in the dark? Have they, Phillip? Are we both mad?"

"Claire," he implored. "Please don't—"

Something struck him in the face. A smother of feathers which choked and half blinded him before it fell with a plop to the floor, and rolled over on its back. Phillip looked down at the dead chicken, and shuddered convulsively.

"Phillip." Claire's voice was quieter now. "Your face is all blood. If something large hits us, we'll be looking *up* at two more tombstones."

It was a long time before Phillip said, "I know, Claire."

"Phillip, if we shut our eyes and walked straight ahead do you—"

Phillip shook his head. "The walls are solid, Claire. Don't they feel solid to *you?*"

"But Phillip, don't you see? They *feel* solid because we're thinking about them in the wrong way. If we shut our eyes and thought about them in a different way we might . . . we might find ourselves *outside.*"

A cop on a motorcycle jogged toward them and stayed for a full minute, his eyeballs distended and his head twisted to one side.

"What's keeping you up?" he yelled.

Phillip leaned toward him, his face ashen. "Can't you see the car?"

"Car? What car, buddy? You ain't in any car."

"Then how do we look to you?" Phillip's voice was a shriek. "Please, tell me—"

"You look screwy to me. It's rainin' so hard I can't see the ropes. What's keepin' the parachute up? Why ain't it flappin' around in plain view?"

Before Phillip could reply, the motorcyclist shot sideways, and disappeared.

"We must have made a sharp turn," Phillip said.

The water crept in so insidiously that Phillip wasn't aware that the floor had become a lake until Claire's skirt floated up about her knees.

It was filthy brown water, swamp water, and an odor of decay surged from it as it slapped at Phillip's trousers and mounted swiftly to his waist. A lily pad had come swirling in with it, and there were raucous croakings, and the smell of something rotten that made him leap upon the bench with a startled cry.

He had no memory of pulling Claire up beside him, only of her clinging presence close to him as the water rose.

"We must have left the road again," he choked.

The water continued to rise. It swirled up over the bench to their waists, chilling them through their clothes.

"Swamps aren't very deep, as a rule," Phillip soothed. Even as he spoke the water mounted to their shoulders. He had read somewhere that drowning wasn't painful. Not painful, not—not nearly as painful as being smashed to a mangled pulp. By leaving the road and plunging into a swamp the driver had performed an act of incredible kindness.

A coldness was creeping about his throat now. With a convulsive shudder, he pulled his gaze downward. The steamy, malarial tide had risen to his chin, and was slapping the lily pad against his Adam's apple.

"Claire," he husked. "Darling, we—" and stopped. And stared.

Claire was not looking down. She was looking *up,* and clinging to him and sobbing.

"Phillip, Phillip, we're *outside.* It's stopped raining, and that's the sky up there, and we're not going to die. Oh, Phillip—"

Phillip straightened in the cold swamp, and looked up, and saw that it was true. Above him arched the night sky, star-studded, glimmering with misty radiance, and the vehicle—Phillip stood trembling, unable to believe his eyes. The vehicle had left the swamp, and *was traveling straight up into the sky.*

It was a long, gray vehicle, and Phillip could see the barred windows, and a little step low down in back which chilled him so that he wanted to scream. The vehicle looked exactly like a Black Maria, and Phillip wanted to shriek out that he wasn't a criminal, and hadn't deserved *that* kind of a ride.

Equally chilling was the vast, floating shadow which was hovering in the depths of the sky. Dim against the constellations was something that looked a little like an enormous human face, with cavernous eyes, and hair that clung in soggy strands to its brow. It was fading so rapidly that it was the wispiest of outlines before the ascending vehicle passed into a cloud up close to it, and *did not come out.*

"Phillip," Claire choked. "We'd better get out of this muck before we— Phillip, I think I'm going to faint. Oh, darling, hold me up. Don't let me faint in this awful swamp."

Phillip squared his shoulders and tightened his hold on her waist. "I won't, dear," he promised. "I won't. I won't."

The little man in the therapeutic ward blinked sleep from his eyelids and stared out over the Purple City. Far below him ships laden with merchandise from Carthis and Nis were coming up the South River toward the docks and warehouses of the Illyan Co., their emerald hulls resplendent in the dawn.

The little man wanted to write a poem about those ships, and the wheeling gulls, and the sea tides tossing free. It was some years since he had stopped thinking of himself as a young man. He was a census taker; not a poet. He had always secretly despised poets, but this morning he had the outlook of youth, somehow.

The attendants here deserved their jobs. With rare understanding they had moved his sleeping cabinet to the window, so that he could look out over the city in the dawn. Beside him in other cabinets were four splendid fellows who deserved their jobs, too. The lad right next to him, Macilrimp, went after criminals hammer and tongs; tax evaders especially.

He was all right, Macilrimp was. So was Sinsanawan, over on his left. Lord, what a dream that had been. He had really put himself into that one. He had stumbled by accident on a very dangerous criminal and notified the Pickup Squad. A Mr. Phillip Elston, in a district called Yonkers. Odd name, odd house—with no door whistle.

A house like that could only exist in a dream.

These new sleeping cabinets were really something. They stimulated the supraconscious and melted down the barriers between minds, so that dreams took on an aspect of reality. The sleeping mind was a primitive, dark labyrinth, but these new cabinets put luminous guideposts at every turn. With the new cabinets people could meet in their dreams, and compare notes.

He was glad he had volunteered to test out the new cabinets. He and Macilrimp and the splendid fellows on his left had shared an exhilarating experience. They had clamped down on an ugly customer—a figment of the supraconscious such as Frewcilwimp had known how to deal with in his superb "Interpretation of Dreams."

You transferred your repressed desires and impulses into supraconscious images which were often repulsive. Phillip Elston had been that kind of image. A tax evader, *with no wives.* You felt a lot cleaner when you clamped down on the darker figments. In no time at all now every man, woman and child in the Purple City would be sleeping in cabinets, and awakening refreshed and restored. Instead of running smack into slimy walls they would be assisted by the law in their dreams. Therapeutically, these new sleeping cabinets were—

He stiffened in sudden startlement. Macilrimp was groaning now, and murmuring in his sleep. "Sinsanawan, I can't see the road. It's fading out. Y'hear? It's all blurry up ahead. What'll I do?"

The little man relaxed with a quiet smile. Quite obviously Macilrimp was waking up. Above the tall cabinet his head was jiggling like a jumping bean, but in a moment now the vibrations would stop and he would be staring out across the Purple City, too.

He'd have to ask Macilrimp about the last part of the dream. He had left the four splendid lads on the doorstep of that fantastic house, searching about for a whistle that wasn't there. Had they jugged the Elston figment? He wouldn't know, because right at that point a factory whistle far below had jolted him wide awake, and broken up the dream which he had shared with Macilrimp telepathically.

Funny thing about the supraconscious. It wasn't colorful at all. It was teeming with ugly images, all gray and festooned with smoke. Even its factories were ugly—not clean and white like the factories down below.

He couldn't understand why some people tried to escape from reality in dreams. Tried to escape by drawing the supraconscious down over their waking minds like a cloak, shutting out the Purple City, the ships with green and orange sails, and the sea tides tossing free.

The real world was beautiful indeed, but the world of dreams—ugh.

THE END.

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—AND HAVING WRIT—

Edd Cartier is in the army. Wonder if he's doing camouflage designed to make the enemy sleepless via the nightmare route?

Dear Mr. Campbell:

It's quite a job getting "down to earth," and writing a letter on the October issue of Unknown Worlds, after being in the lands of gnomes, fairies, and various other mythological characters. This issue rated tops with me not only because of the new format, but because of the rare quality within.

"The Land Of Unreason" was very good, but it didn't have that certain strain of uniqueness that was prevalent in the first few yarns of this type. I don't know why that was. Perhaps it's because this same theme has been used so much in Unknown recently. Now and then, please give us some horror stories of the type of "Fear," "But Without Horns," and "It." Not necessarily shorts and novelettes, but good long novels, something to put your teeth into. Also, as a change, more fantasy of the sort that A. Merritt and Clark Ashton Smith made so popular.

The novelettes were excellent. Robert Bloch seemed to have acquired a Damon Runyon touch and has turned out an enjoyable bit of nonsense. I didn't think Kuttner had it in him to pen anything as good as "A Gnome There Was." The ending was superb and added to the thrill of the yarn.

Among the shorts, most were either very good or good; only one had no place in Unknown, and that was "The Dolphin's Doubloons." As far as I could see, there wasn't any fantasy to this, just plain adventure, but interesting none the less. L. Ron Hubbard turned out the best short of the whole bunch, but don't use him so doggone much. Cleve Cartmill is swell. Could that be a pen name? Speaking of pen names, I've got a sneaking suspicion the article on Nostradamus was written by none other than ye ed. It seemed like it, anyway.

The art work was great. Edd Cartier's illustrations were, of course, the best. Please let him do the pics for the novel every month; unless, of course, you can spell him with Virgill Finlay. Orban, as usual, was absolutely rotten. Schneeman deteriorates whenever he uses his new style. Kramer, for a change, was up to form, but still not so hot.

How about slick pages and about ten more pages added to the novel?—Vincent Scullin, Hotel Traymore, Atlantic City, N. J.

You can get "The Roaring Trumpet" and a modified "Mathematics of Magic" by de Camp and Pratt in book form now.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I hope you will be pleasantly surprised when I assure you I do not intend to criticize every yarn published in Unknown since March, 1939. There are so many who can do the job better. Just check your "Readers Department"!

I would much rather salute the stories that I particularly liked. These are, to mention but a very few: "Lest Darkness Fall," "On the Knees of the Gods," "The Wheels of If," "The Castle of Iron," and "The Mislaid Charm." Author de Camp did so fine a job in the first that I put that copy of Unknown in my library which specializes with history.

Of course, there are at least a dozen other stories that I liked very much, but these rate top honors with me. More, please. Much more. Authors L. Ron Hubbard, de Camp, Nelson S. Bond, Phillips, Sturgeon and Heinlein.

I have missed too many issues of Unknown and its companion, *Astounding*, and wonder if some of the other readers mightn't care to trade with me. Despite numerous loans, I still have about a dozen mags left, and these I'll swap.

May I cheer for the new, enlarged Unknown Worlds? I'll pay you still another nickel more if you'll add still another forty thousand words of text.—Simpson M. Ritter, 1160 Simpson Street, New York, N. Y.

That "something" is nightmares, perhaps?

Dear Sir:

Back in 1940, July, to be exact, I read a story by L. Ron Hubbard called "Fear." As a fantasy, it was the finest, most heart-pounding thing I've ever finished in one reading. It opened up a field of writing that I didn't know existed. "Fear" has been a story that will not let go of my mind. I'm not much of a pulp reader. Not too high-brow, understand, but just so damned busy scribbling my own stuff that I never get to them.

That story persisted in hanging on with a bulldog grip. I saved the magazine and have it with my most valued books. Such a story in hard binding would set a few of our best sellers on the back shelves.

With the thing in mind, I picked up October

Unknown Worlds last week and read every story in the book. That's a new high for pulp reading on my part. My password has always been, "read one and you've read 'em all." No good now. I have tossed the line into the wastebasket and decided to try your escape fiction as a steady diet.

Tell the boys who produced "Land Of Unreason" that they have an imagination that I hope to have with practice. A really fine story for a cold, rainy night.

For bed-light reading, your mag has something they can't take away from you with the best Western or adventure yarns on the stands.

If I can escape Podrang—the Gnome King, Georgie—the Smoke Ghost, and Kobolds, I'll be coming along one of these days with a nice wild mixture of fairy magic myself.—LeRoy Yerxa, 946 Windsor Avenue, Chicago.

The "Finger" got jammed in the crowding of new issues and had to stop writing a while.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

In my first published letter to Unknown Worlds I signed off "Till the Moving Finger stops writing." It would seem to have stopped; I waited three issues just to make sure. But no; the old claw doesn't show a sign of life.

"Of Things Beyond" is going, too. *Oi!*

And there was no excuse for the loss of "Of Things Beyond." It was more than a mere advertising medium—it contained some information genuinely interesting (I'm thinking more of the ones about the banshee and the leprechauns, in this case), worthy of filing away in the Big Black Book used by every aspiring sorcerer. So why not a restoration of said column, along with "—And Having Writ—"?

The large size of your magazine finds me very receptive. I like it very much. BUT—how about some illustrations to match? (The one on page 21 of the February issue misses "matching" by four lines—why, however, only one such?) The artist then has more space to spread out. And while we're on the subject of illustrations, hand a bouquet to Mr. Kramer. He seems to have mended his evil ways and is now turning out very commendable pics—I mistook some of them for Cartier's.

There is one point which I think is important: although the object of the large size, plain cover, et cetera, is to make the magazine a "slick" in form as well as in content, Unknown Worlds has not graduated to the slick rack! The storekeeper inserts the magazine into the pulp rack at right angles to its former position—so that it will fit—and abandons it to its fate. That same pulp rack is the place to which the audience you want will not come. This may be local or it may not; I was just wondering whether or not national reaction would be the same way. If so, it is high time S & S put its foot into things; for Unknown Worlds certainly deserves wider recognition than it has. Besides, possibly with a circulation boom you could go monthly—*n'est ce pas?*

Awaiting "The Moving Finger's" arrival—Paul Carter, 156 University Street, Blackfoot, Idaho.

Dear Campbell:

I wish to file a protest against the use to which Anthony Boucher put the prophecies of Nostradamus in his article in the October issue. Specifically, I object to his interpretation of the quatrain:

The young lion shall conquer the old
On the warlike field in single combat
In a golden cage he shall pierce his eyes
Two classes one, then die a cruel death.

In the first place, *singulier* may be translated as "odd, peculiar," as well as "single." That point is minor, but it will help support my contentions.

My real objection is that Mr. Boucher seeks to filch the honor of having been foreseen by Michel de Notredame from some of my own ancestors and confer it on a lot of frog-eatin' furriners. *Le lyon vieux* undoubtedly is my great-grandfather, Lyman R. Lyon, a belligerent York State squire who in the 1840's horsewhipped his brother Caleb in the streets of Rome, New York. This incident is the basis of the horsewhipping episode in Walter Edmonds' novel, "The Big Barn," and I hoped it would fit Nostradamus' *singulier duelle.* Unfortunately it transpired that Lyman Lyon was considerably older than his brother, both at the time of the horsewhipping and later.

However, Lyman Lyon's relations with his sons Howard and Chester were also stormy. After one estrangement, my great-uncle Howard Lyon undertook to get even with his old man by publicly disgracing the family, which he accomplished by getting drunk and rolling around the gutters of Rome. This is certainly the "victory in a singular duel" promised by Prophet Mike.

Nothing in Howard's known career fits the line about the golden cage, et cetera. But in the later years of the last century my other great-uncle, Chester Lyon, lost all of his and some other folks' money in Wall Street, and thereupon blew his brains out with a pistol. If that doesn't fit "in a golden cage he shall put out his eyes—then die a cruel death," what does?

The "two classes one" is easy. During the Civil War, Lyman R. Lyon presented muskets to the Union volunteers from his township; Nostradamus' phrase hence unmistakably refers to the

Continued on page 130

BOOK REVIEW

THE WHITE WOLF, by Franklin Gregory. New York, Random House, 1941. 271 pp.

The great werewolf novel has yet to be written. The vampire has Dracula, the man-made monster has Frankenstein, the witch has Lolly Willowes; but the literature of lycanthropy boasts no single outstanding and definite classic.

The resultant gap is tempting, and "The White Wolf" is the latest attempt at filling it. But the result raises doubts as to whether it is a gap that can ever be satisfactorily filled.

Is it possible now, at this late date, to write a good fantasy novel strictly on a werewolf theme? When the werewolf was as fresh material as the vampire was in 1897, it should have been possible to produce the Dracula of the field. But instead of one striking masterpiece, the werewolf has fathered a dozen or so novels and hundreds of short stories, many of them unbelievably bad and some few good.

As a result, the field is exhausted before it has ever been properly exploited. Even the hypothetical Great Werewolf Novel, if it should appear now, would seem trite and hackneyed, if only because we have read the same material so often in lesser versions. What is there to tell in a werewolf novel beyond the fact of lycanthropy? What is your story beyond the startling revelation that the pale and beautiful young countess and the Morbid Monster of the Moors are one and the same?

Even your details can vary but little. The wound to the animal that appears on the human being, the paw prints of the beast which give place to human tracks, and finally, of course, the silver bullet and the ghastly transformation—all these matters, which should inherently be so dramatic and so terrible, are now the merest convention, as formularized as the roundup of suspects in the mystery novel.

Jack Williamson, in his "Darker Than You Think"—an admirable novel surely deserving book publication—escapes from the conventionality of lycanthropy by broadening its scope immeasurably. His daring concept of *Homo lycanthropus,* his extension of the metamorphic process to cover all forms of animal life for one individual, these give the story tremendous freshness and power. But excellent though the novel is, it remains a treatment of a new, imaginative and peculiarly Williamson concept, rather than a true novel of traditional lycanthropy.

By the way, may I propose to fantasy writers the term *therianthropy,* which would apply to any man-into-animal transformation, and suggest to Mr. Williamson that his horribly plausible species might be more appositely christened *Homo therianthropus?)*

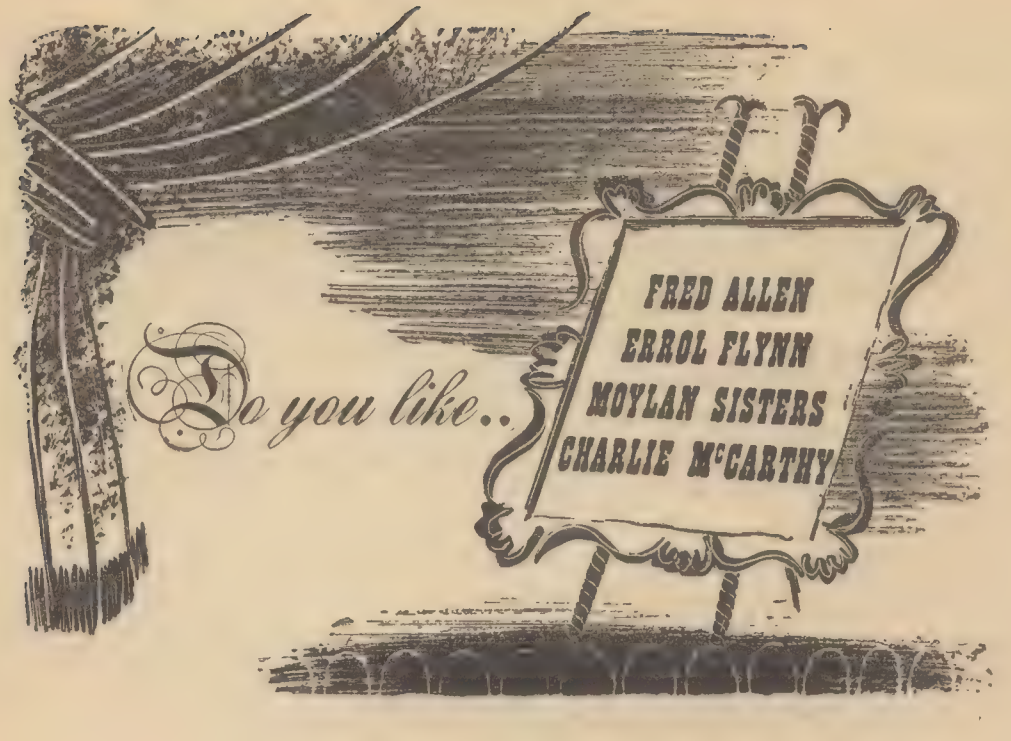
Unlike Endore and Williamson, Franklin Gregory does not seek any way out of the dilemma of triteness. "The White Wolf" is a perfectly straight werewolf novel, differing from its predecessors only in having contemporary Pennsylvania for its setting. A charming debutante, heiress to a perfume fortune, is likewise heiress to a classic curse. Old Hugues de Camp-d'Avesnes, Comte de Saint-Pol, burned down the Abbey of Saint-Riquier at Ponthieu on July 28, 1131. Since then, every seventh generation of the de Camp-d'Avesnes has produced a werewolf, and the lovely Sara is the sole representative of this current, and seventh, generation.

There is no need to detail the plot from that point. Every step follows exactly and inevitably, until Sara receives a silver bullet on page 268. The novel is well written, there is a reasonable amount of grue, the Pennsylvania-Dutch locale is vividly and convincingly depicted, the characterizations of the lesser personages and even the difficult portrait of Sara herself are completely satisfactory. But you are haunted throughout by a dreadful feeling of having read it all.

A more serious fault is that Mr. Gregory's black magic is frequently illogical; and as all readers of fantasy are well aware the supernatural sets far higher standards of logic than the naturalistic. I am more than willing to believe in werewolves. I am even willing to believe that a photograph taken of a werewolf shows the actual human being—though this implies that the phenomenon is one of mass delusion rather than metamorphosis, which does not jibe with lupine footprints near the corpses. But I cannot possibly attain sufficient suspension of disbelief to accept the author's statement that the positive print shows a human being, while the negative shows a wolf.

Despite its flaws, however, and despite even its lack of novelty, "The White Wolf" is a book to be welcomed. Supernatural fiction, literately written, is a rare event in the catalogue of a major publishing house. And though Mr. Gregory's novel is not one that you'd shove aside the classics to make room for, it's definitely readable. We can hope that this, together with Perry's "The Survivor," the joyous de Camp novels, and John Collier's brilliant "Presenting Moonshine" may mark the approach of a definite place in publishing for fantastic fiction.

Anthony Boucher.



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TEN CENTS AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

POBBY

By Jane Rice

● Pobby was a difficult character for an author to handle. He kept coming around to visit the writer, demanding that the ending be changed. He didn't want the plant to grow—

Illustrated by M. Isip

Hugh Gibbons inserted another sheet of paper in his typewriter, struck the numerals 2 and 6, parenthesized "Installment 1," double spaced, pressed the margin release and wrote—

Pobby scratched his head and, looking askance at the seed he held in his hand, said to himself, "Don't reckon as how I know what it is, but ifn it'll grow 'twont be long 'fore I will." He hiked up his faded and patched denims and knelt in the rich, black earth. With a begrimed forefinger he made a hole in the loamy soil. "No, siree," he said, " 'twont be long. Ifn it'll grow, it'll grow for Pobby."

Hugh double spaced four times, jabbed the shift lock and typed in black capitals—BREAK —INST. ONE— He whished the sheet from the typewriter, clipped it to a sizable stack beside his elbow, whiffled through them quickly—smiling to himself, nodding approvingly, making an occasional penciled notation or drawing a circle about a word, appending an arrow to it and shooting it forward or backward a phrase at a time. This having been done, he fed a second sheet of paper into the typewriter, headed it "The Flower," shot the carriage back, struck the numeral 1, parenthesized "Installment 2," double spaced, pressed the margin release and poised his fingers above the keyboard like a concert pianist preparing for a swift succession of runs.

There was a discreet knock at the door.

A shadow of annoyance crossed Hugh Gibbons' countenance. A fellow could sit the whole afternoon chewing his tongue and staring at a blank piece of paper that steadily grew blanker and everything was quiet as the well-known tomb. But let him get started. Let him get his teeth into an idea, and what happened? A fast game of knock-knock, that's what happened. Knock-knock who's there? Hugh. Hugh who? Yoo hoo yourself, you blithering idiot.

"Yes?" he called wearily.

The door opened just wide enough to enable the valet to slip through without touching.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but your bath is ready."

"Oh it is, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, *you* take it, Smuthers." Hugh turned back to his typewriter.

Smuthers coughed deferentially. "Begging your pardon, sir, but it's five forty-five."

Hugh spread his hands over the keys. He put his lower lip over his upper one and exhaled loudly through his nose. For a fleeting instant he bore a striking resemblance to Ferdinand the Bull's elder brother.

"Smuthers," he said.

"Yes, sir?"

"I am going to count up to ten, Smuthers."

"Yes, sir."

"And, by the time I reach ten, if you aren't out of this room, that little section of carpet you're standing on will be known to thousands of tabloid readers as X."

"Yes, sir."

"Quite clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. One, two, three—"

"But, sir—"

"Four, five—"

"Begging your pardon, sir—"

"Six, seven, eight—"

"You have a dinner engagement with the Lloyds at seven, sir."

"Nine, te— *What!* Oh, my aunt! My jumping aunt! Why didn't you— Look, Smuthers, call them up, will you, and tell them I'm sick? Tell them I have measles or something."

"That's what you told them last week, sir." The valet cleared his throat. "Mumps it was, sir."

"I'm out of town, that's it. Had to run up to Perth Amboy or Walla Walla or *any* place to . . . to see my publishers."

"Mr. Lloyd *is* your publisher, sir."

"So he is. Well, tell him the truth. Tell him I've finally gotten an idea after stewing in my own juice, which is most unpalatable by the way, and I'd better get on with my basting and what not before I—well, you know how I am, Smuthers."

"Yes, sir. But I hardly would

"I want to see him because I don't want to plant the seed. He'll make me and the plant will—"

advise telling your publisher, sir."

"Wouldn't do, eh?"

"I think not, sir. A publisher—you know how *they* are, Mr. Gibbons."

"Yes. You're right, Smuthers. They really *are*, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir."

Hugh pulled his nose ruminatively. His face brightened. "How about bronchitis?"

The valet made a depreciating gesture. "Mrs. Lloyd, sir," he said gently.

"Calf's foot jelly and all that, Smuthers?"

"And mint tea, sir, and pansies. Mrs. Lloyd is very fond of pansy bouquets. Too fond, if I may say so, sir."

"Horrible, aren't they?" Hugh Gibbons heaved a great sigh.

"Yes, sir."

"Tally ho, Smuthers."

"Yes, sir."

"And yoicks."

"Yes, sir."

"And a quick Scotch—no, make it a Martini with a pickled onion in it—and, Smuthers—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do you believe in God?"

"Yes I do, sir."

"Well, if you're in good standing, ask Him for me if He'll please see that Pobby is well taken care of. Not to let him dust out on me."

"Pobby, sir?"

"Pobby."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you, Smuthers."

"Not at all, sir."

Smuthers yawned. He rubbed the calf of his right leg with the toe of his left shoe. He put his little finger in his ear and jiggled it violently. He arose, stiffly. He stretched. He said,

"Ahhhhhawwwwww." He went over to the sink and ran water in a milk-rimed glass. He polished the glass, held it up to the light, breathed on it and gave it an extra swipe.

The doorbell chimed. Three musical notes pealing softly in the silence.

Smuthers paused in the act of replacing the dish towel.

Now who could be ringing the bell at this hour? Mr. Gibbons had his key. Unless—of course—dear me, and they were out of bromo seltzer and Mr. Gibbons did swear so frightfully when he had a hangover, much less the getting him to bed in the first place. A boiled shirt in such a case was a catastrophe and it was dreadful to rip one up the back. It was like striking one's own mother.

Smuthers buttoned his vest, shrugged into his coat and glided off into the foyer. He unlatched the door and it is to Smuthers' credit that by not so much as a lifted eyebrow did he betray his surprise. Smuthers, had he but known it, would have made a poker player par excellence.

"Yes," said Smuthers, his voice as expressionless as a debutante's smile.

The man in the entrance swallowed. He wiped one roughened hand on his faded and patched denim overalls. The other hand, tightly balled, he thrust behind him.

"Is this here where Mr. Gibbons lives?"

"Mr. Gibbons is not at home." Smuthers edged the door to an inch or so.

"I'd like mighty well to see him."

"If you'll leave your name, when Mr. Gibbons returns I'll tell him you called."

"Name's Pobby. I reckon I'll wait, ifn it's all the same."

"Pobby? Oh, *Pobby*."

"Yessir. I'd like mighty well to wait." The man shifted from one mud-caked foot to the other.

For a moment Smuthers hesitated. It was late. Mr. Gibbons didn't like visitors. The man was definitely not the type who—but hadn't Mr. Gibbons said something about a Mr. Pobby being taken care of? Smuthers opened the door. He stood aside, elbows crooked ever so slightly.

"May I take your hat, sir?"

Pobby shuffled in hesitantly and stood embarrassed and ill at ease in the hall. "Ain't got none," he said. He looked around for a chair and, seeing the marks of his boots on the shining parquet flooring, swallowed again and essayed a sheepish grin at Smuthers.

"Mebbe I better wait outside."

"I'll take you to the library, sir."

Smuthers led the way, Pobby following, his heavy hump-toed shoes squeaking, his head on a continual pivot.

"*Wheweee,*" he whistled admiringly. He jounced up and down on the sofa with obvious delight. His eye caught a small bronze nude on the table. Hastily he averted his gaze.

"Scotch, sir?"

Pobby looked at Smuthers. "Nope," he said, "American. I was born here." His weather-beaten face fell into sorrowful lines. He glanced around the paneled, book-lined walls. "Right here," he said, "in this here very place."

"I meant, sir, would you care for a drink?"

"Why, that's mighty nice. Wouldn't want to put you to no trouble. I might could get it myself."

"Oh *no*, sir." An infinitesimal shiver passed over Smuthers' frame and momentarily he had qualms. Perhaps there was a mistake. Mr. Gibbons' friends, as a rule, were—well, they knew their place. But Mr. Gibbons had distinctly said to see that this—this Pobby was taken care of. Taken care of—heavens to Betsy, supposing he had meant that he was simply to be presented with money, or given a suit of clothes. Holy mackerel, and he, Smuthers, had let this person in. Had seated him in the library. Was, even now, preparing to get him a drink.

Smuthers summoned his courage about him and said, "Could I ask the nature of your call, sir?"

"You mean what do I need of Mr. Gibbons?"

"Yes, sir."

Pobby unclenched his fist and extended it, palm upward, toward Smuthers. "I wanted to talk to him about this here."

Smuthers peered down his nose at the calloused and none-too-clean hand. He blinked. He peered again. On the man's palm reposed a bean-shaped seed. Smuthers didn't know why he, suddenly, should be filled with loathing except that, somehow, it was nasty-looking. A kind of slimy green and covered with fine, silvery hair.

"He's a-going to make me plant it, lessn I can stop him," Pobby continued, "and I got to stop him." He beat the words out with the flat of his hand on his knee. "I got to," he said desperately. "I jest *got* to."

Smuthers had the distinct sensation that his wits had all performed an abrupt about face and had marched out the back of his head.

"Mr. *Gibbons* is going to make you"—he began in a high falsetto voice, stopped, cleared his throat and finished an octave lower—"I think, sir, you must have the wrong address. This is the residence of Mr. Hugh Gibbons. Mr. Gibbons writes, sir. He is not a . . . a . . . farmer."

"You're telling me," observed Pobby succinctly. "And if you *asts* me, he's never even seen a farmer. He's got me h'isting my pants when I go to kneel down to plant suthin."

"I'm afraid, sir—"

"You're afraid," said Pobby grimly, "what do you think I am! I got the trembles so bad I act like a chicken with the tizic. Get the dry sweats, so I

have, jest thinking about it. It ain't right for Mr. Gibbons to do this to me. I ain't never harmed him none. It's agin the rights of Magna Carta, that's what it is, so it is."

Smuthers looked from Pobby to the seed and back to Pobby again.

"Magna Carta?"

"Yessir. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Mr. Gibbons ain't got no call to send me to my death thisaway, 'thout so much as a by your leave."

"Your *death,* sir!"

"You don't think I'm going to live after I'm chewed up, et, swallered 'n' digested, do you? Why I ain't got a fighting chance."

"Et—eaten by *what,* sir?"

"Why, by this here"—Pobby indicated the seed.

Moisture dewed the Smuthers' brow and Smuthers' eyes grew slightly glazed.

"I'll bring your drink, sir."

"Thankee. I declare I'm plumb whooed from worrying. Ain't nothing like worry to squz out a man's innards."

"No, sir." Smuthers departed. Hurriedly.

He went into the tiny alcove that served as a bar and, after rattling the ice tongs, he tiptoed to the door and peeked out at Pobby.

Pobby was sitting as Smuthers had left him and was stroking the damask sofa with undisguised pleasure.

Smuthers tiptoed back, poured a jigger of Scotch, dumped it into a glass, spilling half of it in the process; he gave the seltzer siphon a hefty squirt, placed the drink on a tray, opened a drawer, removed a long-bladed knife, secreted this in his trousers—the handle protruding above his belt; he picked up the tray and with stately tread returned to the library and presented the drink to Pobby.

Pobby accepted it gratefully. "Muddy, ain't it?" he said. He took a great draft. His countenance became suffused with pink. For the full count of three it was a toss-up whether the mouthful was going down or out. It went down, Pobby's Adam's apple gyrating with the effort.

"Gorsh," he wheezed, "thet water's shore got a taste. Ifn it was me, I'd boil it to be on the safe side."

"My glory!" breathed Smuthers and then, as the scrape of a key in the lock reached his ears, he managed a caricature of a smile. "I think that's Mr. Gibbons coming in now, sir."

It would be a gross injustice to intimate that Smuthers fled. Fleeing was not a Smuthers' trait. It was more on the order of a fast one-step with the buttons thrust well forward and the coat tails at an angle.

Hugh Gibbons shed his coat and slung his muffler around Smuthers' neck.

"Hi ya," he said, "go on to bed before you get bags under your eyes."

"Mr. Gibbons, sir—"

"For your own information, Smuthers, I am very tired of conversation. Good night."

"But, Mr. Gibbons—"

"I'm going to hatch out a couple of legs and arms on a brain child, Smuthers, and I *don't* want to be bothered. Even if the house burns down. Especially if the house burns down. I'm allergic to firemen. Good night."

"Yes, sir. There's a gen—"

"Splendid. I'll have it for breakfast with a rasher of bacon. Grilled. Good night, Smuthers."

Hugh Gibbons swung down the hall and disappeared into his work room. Smuthers—arms loaded with coat, hat at a rakish tilt, muffler dangling, trailed him.

"Please, sir—"

Gibbons straddled the stool before his typewriter. He pursed his lips, crooked his fingers and with a rapid spurt wrote:

Deftly Pobby dropped the seed into the ground, covered it with dirt, tamped it down and surveyed the result with satisfactioo.

"Mr. Gibbons, *please—*"

Hugh erased the second o, blew the crumbs into the typewriter, back spaced, hit the letter n, and said with deadly calm, "I'm going to fire you in about two seconds."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Pobby is in the library, sir."

"I don't know any Mr. Pobby. Go away." He raised his chin, startled. "Pobby?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what do you know?" said Hugh. "Speaking of coincidences. Or weren't we?"

"No, sir. He wants to see you about a . . . a seed, sir."

Hugh Gibbons swiveled around and regarded Smuthers open-mouthed.

"A seed!"

"Yes, sir. I think he's a shade on the—that is, sir, he is—he seems to be suffering from hallucinations."

Gibbons arose with alacrity. "In the library you say?"

"Yes, sir. In my opinion he's dangerous, Mr. Gibbons. He keeps talking wildly and apparently is quite out of his head."

"Is, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I know this sounds foolish, sir, but he insists he is going to be eaten by this seed and that you are going to make him plant it. He even has a seed with him, sir. A hideous-looking seed, if I do say so." Smuthers trotted after Gibbons endeavoring to keep up with his long-legged stride. "Don't you think it advisable to arm yourself, sir?"

Gibbons entered the library and halted. It was empty. He turned on Smuthers who was attempting to extricate the knife and was succeeding only in stuffing the ends of the muffler into his trousers.

"Where is he?"

"Why, I don't know, sir," Smuthers said, astonished. "He was here only a moment ago.

See, there's a dent in the sofa where he was sitting."

"Smuthers—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Have you been getting a mild bun on?"

"Oh no, sir! I swear this Mr. Pobby was here. Right there, sir. Big as life, he was. He had an overalls and squeaky boots." Smuthers poked one arm from under the coat and pointed to the carpet. "There's some mud off them."

"How'd he get in?"

"I let him in, sir. I remembered you said that a Mr. Pobby should be taken care of and I—"

Hugh Gibbons stooped and examined the blob of mud. "Was it a green seed," he queried, "with hair on it? Cobwebby hair, sort of?"

"*Yes,* sir."

"I gather he wasn't overly thrilled with it."

"No sir. If I recall correctly, he wanted you to *not* let him plant it. Shall I search the house, sir? He may have concealed himself in a closet. A lunatic, if ever I saw one, Mr. Gibbons."

"Go to bed, Smuthers."

"But this . . . this Mr. Pobby, he—"

"Never mind. Go on to bed."

"Yes, sir."

"Good night, Smuthers."

"Good night, sir. If I may say so, sir, I would suggest locking your door."

"All right, Smuthers. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

Hugh Gibbons retraced his steps. Once more he straddled the stool. He reread the final sentence.

> Deftly Pobby dropped the seed into the ground, covered it with dirt, tamped it down and surveyed the result with satisfaction.

"Odd," said Hugh Gibbons to himself. "Deuced odd." He lighted a cigarette and puffed it

musingly. "I wonder if I erased that sentence, if—" He shook his head impatiently. "Don't be silly, old boy," he said, "there's some logical explanation behind it. Smuthers has been drinking or dreaming or both, or maybe it *was* a lunatic, or—oh, the hell with it—get to work."

He snuffed out his cigarette, rumpled his hair, and began to type busily.

There was something about a gray day, thought Hugh Gibbons as he turned his car over to the curb attendant, that made one introspective. A "whither are we drifting?" feeling—the "there but for the grace of God go I" sort of thing. He shifted his paper to fish in his pocket and by the Braille system selected half a dollar and plopped it in the hand of the man who stood by the wrought-iron railing leading up the steps to the club. Poor devil. Patched overalls, ill-fitting shoes, not even an overcoat, and a hungry, hopeful look about him as if he, Hugh Gibbons, were the answer to an unvoiced, despairing cry.

Someone slapped him on the back. Bub Tolliver.

"Hi-ho, Hawkshaw," said Bub heartily. "How's the horror business?"

Hugh grinned. "Swell," he answered. "Just finished the second installment of my latest. Guaranteed to turn your money white or your hair black."

"I don't care about my hair, but the last job you did reacted on my vascular bundles. Come on in. I'll buy you a drink."

"Mr. Gibbons," the man at the railing cried after the two departing figures. "Jest a minute, Mr. Gibbons; it'll only take a minute." He darted after them to find his path blocked by a uniformed doorman.

"On your way, you. On your way."

"I got to see Mr. Gibbons."

"You don't say."

"'Twon't take but a minute."

"Well, ain't that interesting? Who shall I say is calling?"

"Pobby. You jest tell him Pobby and he'll know."

"Just Pobby, huh?"

"Yessir. Tell him it's about that seed I planted."

"You his gardener?"

"Nosir. I'm jest Pobby. I got to—"

"Don't work for him?"

"Nosir. I—"

"On your way, buddy."

"But I *got* to—"

"Move on, chum."

"Please, I got to ask Mr. Gibbons not to—"

"Get going!"

Hugh Gibbons held his glass up to the light and sighted along the rim at a stuffed and mounted moose head.

"—and that's all there is to it," he said complacently.

"That's *all*." Bub Tolliver blew a smoke ring and stabbed it with his pipestem. "Gibby, where do you get such ideas? Man plants seed. Seed makes plant. Plant eats man. The awful part about it is you look so normal."

Hugh squinted one eye at the moose and said, "Ping." He sipped his drink. "I dunno," he said. "You're walking along with your shoulders hunched, thinking about roasted peanuts, or how would you know a left-handed coffee cup, or suppose the Grand Canyon went up instead of down, and whamo you get an idea. The idea part is easy. It's the hemstitching that's hard. For instance, this story I'm doing, 'The Flower.' You summed it up in nine words. Completely summed it up, you know. *I've* got to stretch those nine words into six installments and do it plausibly. Take Pobby. He has to act real, talk real, *be* real. I have to get it across that Pobby is flesh and blood, not merely an automaton pumped up with semicolons. I have to make you conscious of the fact that here on one side is this hard-working, red-knuckled, bent-backed old duffer who has never so much as hurt a chinch bug, and on the other side is this loathsome, sickening, voracious beast of a plant that is going to wind Pobby around with its tentacles and suck the very marrow from his bones. I've got to make you smell that flower. I've got to make you see each thick, pulpy petal, each nauseous writhing shoot of it. I've got to make you recoil in terror as you watch Pobby tending it, nurturing it, drawing closer and closer to the fate that is in store for him." Hugh Gibbons squinted an eye at Bub Tolliver. "Ping," he said.

Bub Tolliver delved into his glass and brought up a slice of pineapple which he proceeded to eat with relish.

"Poor old Pobby," said Bub Tolliver. "I should think you'd have qualms of conscience. A nice old duck like that. Whyn't you make him a mean, irascible sinner of the first water?"

"Then it wouldn't have any horror value. You'd be glad the flower drained him dry. You'd cheer lustily from the side lines." Gibbons made a wry grimace. "And the bird I'd get could be heard from here to the Bronx."

"You mean it's a case of your ego or Pobby's life."

"I mean it's bread and butter. *Lots* of bread and butter," said Gibbons.

"But, damnation, the beggar hasn't done anything to deserve it."

"I know. Ghastly, isn't it?"

"Ghastly!" Tolliver sat up and leveled a finger at Gibbons' top vest button. "Why, it's the rottenest deal I ever— Now look here, Gibby, that chap isn't even—"

Hugh Gibbons chuckled. "I must have made him more realistic than I thought," he said. He consulted his watch. "I've got to shove off. Promised Angela Milton I'd drop in for tea. And I do mean tea. If you really want to observe a spine-chilling spectacle, stop by some day and

watch her French poodle eat lump sugar. I've gotten some of my best gibble-gibble plots from that blasted pooch. It's a positive inspiration. She curls its bangs. Honest."

Angela Milton's drawing room was as French as a café menu. An Adam mirror surmounted the rose marble mantel and was flanked on each side by intricate candelabra. Small textured wool rugs hugged the waxy floor, and thin furniture, painted white, was placed in strategic groupings. A lacquered table struck a vivid note that was echoed in the bowls of bright flowers and the appliquéd lobster that spraddled up the front of Angela Milton's gown. A poodle lay at the foot of the sofa, its nose between its pompon paws, and with lazy eyes watched his mistress coil a string of cut crystal beads on a nested table so that a shaft of sunlight splintered them into countless frozen rainbows.

"Muzzer's baby s'eepy?" Angela Milton said absently, stepping back to observe the effect of the necklace.

The poodle woofled through his sugar-coated whiskers.

"When Mr. Gibbons comes, Muzzer's baby mustn't rub his nosey-wozy on Mr. Gibbons' trousers." She selected a book at random, opened it and laid it face down on the love seat. "And mustn't gobble. Must eat his sugar slowly."

The poodle got up and stared fixedly at the door. A miniature rumbling sound came from its throat.

Angela stared at him in shocked unbelief. "Why, you growled," she said. "Why, Fluff, you *growled*."

The doorbell rang.

"I'll answer it, Nana," called Angela. "It's probably Mr. Gibbons." She cupped Fluff's chin and admonished him severely. "And *mustn't* growl. It isn't thoroughbred." She swished across the room and disappeared through the archway.

Fluff lifted his lower lip and the curly hair on his shoulders seemed to quiver like tightly drawn wire. He backed away stiff-legged.

There was the faint click of a latch in the hall beyond, a surprised exclamation from Angela and the subdued murmur of a man's voice.

Fluff raised his muzzle to the scrolled ceiling and howled, a long-drawn eerie wail. Then he tucked his tail between his legs and quitted the drawing room unceremoniously, his toenails tiny castanets on the polished floor.

"My good man," said Angela Milton in her best Lady Vere de Vere manner, "if you're hungry you may go to the kitchen entrance and—"

"I ain't hungry, ma'am," the man said patiently. "I want to see Mr. Gibbons."

"Mr. Gibbons isn't here."

"I know he ain't, ma'am. But he ort to be along any minute. Ifn you'll jest let me step inside, I'd shore be mighty satisfied."

"Inside?" Angela Milton regarded his shoes. "Do you work for Mr. Gibbons?"

"In a way. I got to see him, ma'am. It's a matter of life and death."

"Is someone ill?"

"They's going to be ifn I don't see Mr. Gibbons." The man ran his fingers around his shirt collar. "They's going to be mighty daggone ill, ma'am."

"W-ell—" Angela Milton said indecisively. What a strange-looking person. One reads such horrid things in the papers . . . still if it was urgent . . . . the fellow did look beside himself with anxiety . . . oh, damn, and she had so wanted to talk anti-climaxes and things with Hugh . . . what if it were a ruse, though— "You'd better wait outside," she said firmly.

The man's face sagged with disappointment. He contemplated a fifty-cent piece he held in his hand.

"Yes'm," he said forlornly. "Don't think it'll do no good, but I'll try again." He touched his forelock. "Thankee, ma'am, jest the same."

"Again? Have you tried elsewhere?"

"Yes'm. The Athletic Club."

"Oh." Angela was relieved. It would have been *abominable* if he had gone to Mitty Ponder's first. Hugh had danced six dances with Mitty at the Silver Ball. On an impulse Angela opened the door wide. This would be a perfect way of letting Mitty know that people *expected* to find Hugh at *her* home.

"You . . . you may wait in the . . . in the drawing room." This was fun. It would make excellent dinner conversation. She could see Mitty's expression. "You don't mean to say you actually let him in, Angela! Why, my dear, he might have been . . . well . . . *anything*." And her own cool voice replying lightly: "Mitty, *darling*, you're soooo provincial. Hugh says . . . he says . . . uh—" Never mind, she'd figure that out later.

"Come right in," Angela said cordially.

Angela fiddled with a cloisonne cigarette box and passed the tip of her finger over an imaginary spot on the table. The man was *extremely* difficult. "Yes'm." "No'm." "I couldn't rightly say, ma'am." You'd think he'd never talked to a woman before. She hoped he wouldn't rub off on the rose-and-blue covers. She stole a look at him and found him stealing one at her. They both glanced away quickly.

"I'm afraid I didn't get your name," she said politely.

"Pobby, ma'am."

"Where do you live, Pobby?" Perhaps she could send him some clothes. He was positively threadbare.

"Hinton, Louisiana, ma'am."

"You mean to say you came all the way from Louisiana to see Mr. Gibbons!"

"Yes'm."

"Do you expect to be here long?"

"It all depends on Mr. Gibbons," Pobby replied unhappily. "Last time I was here he whooshed me back so fast I was near hind side foremost."

"He did?"

"Yes'm."

Angela beamed on him. She'd heard that Hugh had some very —ah—unusual acquaintances. That during his early career he had even gotten himself thrown into jail for the experience. And hadn't there been a rumrunner, or was it a burglar, whom he had top-hatted and tailed and taken to one of Monty Hilliard's soirées?

"Why did he 'whoosh' you back?" she inquired innocently.

"To plant that there seed."

"Seed?"

"Yes'm."

"Oh, *seed* . . . you did say seed, didn't you?"

"Yes'm."

"I thought you did." Angela flipped the top of the cigarette box back and forth. "What seed?" she asked at last.

"That there flower seed."

"You mean he sent you to Louisiana to plant *flowers.*"

"Flower, ma'am."

Angela mentally ticked off one finger. She wasn't up on horticultural terms. She'd always thought the plural was flowers. But then she'd said gladiolas for years until Mitty Ponder had corrected her so sweetly with "Gladiles, darling, didn't you *know?*" Mitty Ponder. Well, wait until *she* saw "flowers" with a hissy S on the end. Ha.

"How intriguing," Angela said. "What sort of flower?"

Pobby ran his tongue across his lips. "I couldn't rightly say, ma'am."

"Oh, come, come. I suppose it only grows in Louisiana. Possibly an orchid of some sort, or a lily?" This was nothing less than a windfall. Mitty would be *livid.* She would bring it up adroitly—"I think it's too marvelous, Mitty darling, that Hugh raises flowers—*flower.* Didn't you know? Why, my dear, he has a place in Louisiana, a veritable Shangri-la, so he tells me. How novel that you hadn't *heard.*" Oh, boy, this was right up her alley.

Pobby shuddered. "It looks awful," he said. "Course, it ain't much more'n a sprout, but it looks plumb horrible, so it does. There's a little tip on the end, a little nekkid tip, rawlike, and the laterals are thick, kind of. Meaty. And smell! I ain't ever smelled sech a smell, ma'am. It fair turns your gizzle green, so it does."

"How too excruciating," said Angela, who hadn't listened to a word. "Naturally, Mitty, Hugh wouldn't speak of it to *everyone.* But I thought surely he'd have asked your advice. You're forever talking nicotine and emulsions and sprays. Tell me, do your roses still have aphis?"

"Sometimes," Pobby went on, "I think as how I'll lose my mind studying about it. Knowing what's going to become of me. After a rain I can almost see it growing. Tother day I was out putting some fertilizer on it—and h'isting up my pants, dad rat it—and there was a cut on my thumb. Got it from a awl. And this here plant retch out and nibbled at it. I swan if it didn't. I can feel it yet. Cold and squishy-like. Like the underside of a toadstool. Golly." He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "Guess I'm talking a lot, ma'am. Preys on me, kind of."

"I've always contended, Mitty, that one is born with the knack of caring for flowers—flower. It simply *isn't* acquired. I must remember to give you some peony slips next year, Mitty dear. Not that yours aren't lovely. Pink is such a *definite* shade."

"Oh, I'm sure it does," Angela said brightly to Pobby. "Do go on."

The bell rang. She clapped her hands together delightedly. "That must be Hu—Mr. Gibbons. Won't he be surprised."

"Yes'm," Pobby said, "I reckon he will."

Angela excused herself prettily and went to let Hugh in.

"Hugh, darling—" she began, holding out both her hands as she had seen Norma Shearer do.

"*Shush.*" Hugh made no attempt to take the hands, his own being occupied with a notebook and pencil. He scribbled earnestly, paused, sucked in one cheek and scribbled again.

"There's a man here to see you."

"*Shhhhhussssh.*"

"From Louisiana."

"*Mmmmmmmmm.*"

"Hinton, Louisiana."

"Shut up."

"Hugh!"

Gibbons scrawled two more lines, snapped his notebook closed, stached it and the pencil in his pocket, grinned and said: "Well, if it isn't Nurse Cavell. How's my temperature?"

"Hugh you have no manners. None at all. That's the first time in my life anyone told me to shut up."

"It *is!*"

"Yes. Aren't you ashamed?"

"Surprised. You look lovely. What is that thing on you?"

"Where?"

"The front of you."

"A lobster. Isn't it cunning?"

"I don't know."

"Hugh!"

Hugh crossed the threshold and shed his hat and coat. "Let's get at the tea," he said. "Where's pooch?"

"Pooch? Oh, *Fluff.* Why, I don't know. He must have gone out when that man came in."

"What man? Are there two of us?"

"That man I was telling you about."

"You mean all that mumbling you were doing. Angela, when you see a painter painting, or a salesman selling, or an architect architecting, or a writer writing, don't even breathe."

"You rang the bell."

"It was a mistake. I should've finished first. You see, here I am coming up the walk and I get an idea. Opening paragraph for installment three. So I dashes up, whipping out my trusty notebook, ring the bell, and you open the door."

"Of course."

"Of course, of course. But did you have to babble? You do it beautifully, but did you *have* to?"

"This man is *waiting* for you. It's a matter of life and death. I should *think*—"

"What is?"

"What is what?"

"I've often wondered. Look, is someone here to see me?"

"That's what I've been telling you—"

"Where is he?"

"In the drawing room."

"Let's go in the den."

"Why . . . Hugh . . . well . . . I—"

"Dashing devil, aren't I? He needn't know I'm here. I don't want to see a man. I want to sit and drink tea and watch pooch eat sugar."

"But he knows you're here."

"He does?"

"Yes. And besides, even if he didn't, you should see him. He came all the way from Hinton, Louisiana, and he says it's *quite* important."

"Hinton!"

Angela patted his arm and made an amused *moue*. "Don't tell me you aren't acquainted with Hinton."

"I won't. It's the locale of this story I'm doing. I picked it out by shooting a map with an air dart. Do you suppose the chamber of commerce is psychic?"

"Whatever are you talking about?"

"Hinton. Let me take a peek at this fellow."

"But you *know* him."

"I do?"

"Certainly. It's Pobby."

"Pobby!" For an instant Hugh's eyes seemed to have much in common with those of Angela Milton's appliquéd lobster.

"Of course, darling. I've been *trying* to tell you. He plants your flowers—flower for you. He's really most upset."

"You're not pulling my leg, Angela?"

"Why, no. You look all sort of—well, funny. Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. I'll let you know in a minute. The drawing room you say?"

"Yes."

Gibbons strode off, through the archway, stopped, looked about him, and turned back to Angela. "There's no one here."

"No one there? Don't be absurd." Angela swept into the room. She, too, stopped and looked around. "Where did he go?"

"There was someone here? You're sure of that?"

"Naturally. I talked to him. He was sitting right over there. Oh, dear, he *did* rub off on the covers."

"What did you talk about?"

"Planting. He was terribly interested in it. But *you* know."

"What do you mean *I* know?"

"Oh, Hugh, for Heaven's sake, it isn't necessary to pretend. He said you were having him raise . . . well . . . whatever it is."

"Didn't he say what it is?"

"Why, yes, I rather think he did. I . . . I guess I wasn't paying a great deal of attention. I do remember, though, he said the last time he was here you whooshed him back so fast he was near hind side foremost. He was full of the quaintest colloquialisms."

"The last time, eh?"

"Yes. Hugh, something *is* wrong?"

"Could you describe him?"

"He was about so tall and was weather-beaten. He had on overalls and heavy work shoes. Bulgy on the ends. He was pinched-looking, too, as if he were cold, or frightened, or some such. Wherever did he go? Wait, I'll ask cook. He may have gone through the kitchen, or be there possibly. Just a sec." Angela hastened away.

Hugh dug into his pocket and brought forth the notebook. He thumbed through the pages until he came to the one he was searching for.

> Pobby slid his dime across the counter. "One beer, please," he said.
>
> The bartender snaffled the coin and reached for a glass.
>
> "Celebrating?" he kidded.
>
> "That I am," Pobby answered proudly. "My plant's got a bud on it."

Angela came back, Fluff at her heels. "Cook hasn't seen him," she said. "I can't understand where he went."

Hugh eased the notebook into his pocket. "I expect he stepped out for a short beer," he said thoughtfully. "Hello, pooch. Where've *you* been?"

The dog whined.

"But he said it was important. He said it was a matter of life and death."

"That so? What's the matter, boy? You trying to tell me something?"

The dog slunk across the floor and crept beneath the love seat.

"Probably he was overawed by his surroundings."

"Probably."

"Oh, well, I daresay he'll turn up at your place."

"I daresay. 'Long about the end of installment three."

"What did you say?"

"I said your gown is most becoming. Tell me, would it be cricket if I used it for one of my future make-believe ladies?"

Angela moved over to the tea carry and settled herself gracefully behind the silver urn. This was more like it. That Plobby—Probby had monopolized the conversation quite long enough.

"If you wish," she assented demurely. "Is it true, Hugh, that—" Angela was off.

Hugh double spaced four times, punched the shift lock and

typed in bold capitals, "BREAK, INST. THREE." He sat for a few minutes in silence and Angela Milton wouldn't have recognized the expression that spread from his eyebrows to the two little muscles at each corner of his mouth.

"O. K., Pobby," Hugh addressed the paper, "now's your chance, old man. If it *is* you." He removed the sheet, clipped it to its brethren and stowed them in a drawer beneath their paperweighted relatives. He veiled his machine with an oilcloth cover and went out in the hall.

"Yea, Smuthers," he called. He went over to a mirror and poked out his tongue. He examined it fore and aft. He tried to touch his nose with it. Failing in this, he stretched the corners of his mouth with his thumbs, pulled his lower eyelids down with his forefingers and pushed up his nose. Then he crossed his eyes and wiggled his ears.

Smuthers coughed apologetically behind him.

Gibbons said, "Thmuthers, under no thircumsthances"—he removed his thumbs from his mouth and concluded—"do I want you to answer the bell."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll answer any and all bells."

"Yes, sir."

"No barging in, no matter what."

"Yes, sir."

"Got it?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I chill the champagne, sir, or will the Chianti do?"

"This is strictly on the up and up, Smuthers."

"Yes, sir. The champagne or the Chianti?"

"The nothing, Smuthers. On second thought, make it champagne. An experiment, Smuthers."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, stop saying 'yes, sir.' Can't you say 'no, sir'?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let's hear you."

"No, sir."

"That's splendid."

"I meant, sir, that I *wouldn't* say 'no, sir.' It isn't proper."

"It isn't?"

"No, sir. It's unthinkable to disagree with the master, sir."

"I think it's highly commendable."

"Oh, *no*, sir!"

"You're doing fine."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Skip it. Good night, Smuthers."

"Good night, Mr. Gibbons. Mr. Gibbons—"

"What is it, Smuthers?"

"About the chewing gum on the bottoms of the furniture, sir. It's dreadfully hard to—"

Three musical chimes sounded through the house.

"We'll take that up in the morning, Smuthers," Hugh said hastily. "Good night." He whirled Smuthers around and gave him a push.

"Good night, sir." Smuthers moved away on fluid-drive feet.

The champagne bucket was dewy with moisture. Smuthers gave the bottle a final twist, draped a wet napkin over the sandwiches, turned out the lights and went quietly up the back stairs. It can be seen that Smuthers was a pearl of great price. It can also be seen why, during his high-school days, he had not been voted as "Most Likely to Succeed." One of Smuthers' favorite maxims was "Curiosity Killed the Cat." He had but two. The other was "What You Don't Know Can't Hurt You." Shall we leave him taking off his socks and carefully turning in the toes? It scarcely seems fair to hang around while he climbs into his nightshirt.

In the meantime Hugh opened the front door. For a fleeting instant he had the unique sensation that his salivary glands had gone all-out.

The man beyond the door spoke in a breathless rush. "Pleasedon'twritenothingmoretillI'vesaidmysay."

"Do you object if I pinch you?" Hugh said. "I just pinched myself and I think I'm me, but I'm not sure about you."

"I don't care what you do, Mr. Gibbons, ifn you'll only let me in. I been *trying* for three installments."

"Come in, to be sure, come in. You sound bushed."

"I come like a shot. Afore you wrote some more. I'm plum squizzled."

Hugh ushered him into the hall. And, then, his eyes flicking the mirror, he gasped. "You don't reflect in the mirror," he said.

"I cain't help it. You never give me no reflection." Pobby went over to the mirror and looked into it. It looked back imaging a section of wall, a Kent woodcut, a portion of the room beyond, but no Pobby. "I have an awful time shaving." He ran his hand ruefully across his chin. "And about me h'isting my pants, Mr. Gibbons—" he began.

"I didn't give you a shadow, either," Hugh interrupted, staring at Pobby's feet.

"Nor no hat, and I ain't got but one suit of clothes to my name. These here. And they's patched something fierce."

"Turn around," Hugh said. "Slowly. That's it." He gazed at Pobby with admiring detachment. "Perfect," he said; "absolutely perfect. Except for the shadow and the reflection. I'll see that you get them. Installment 4, page 1, Pobby's shadow was a black streak across the floor as, peeping at his reflection in the blurred mirror, he—"

Pobby paled visibly. "Don't," he appealed hoarsely. "Don't, Mr. Gibbons. It's all I can do now to hold myself together as is it. Don't even *think* it, I'm liable to break up. That's what I got to see you about. Mr. Gibbons, you *got* to do something about this here flower afore I gets broke up in a unnatural manner."

"Let's go in the library," Hugh

said. He reached out and pinched Pobby.

"Ouch," said Pobby.

"You *feel,* all right," was Hugh's pleased comment.

"That's what you think," Pobby loped along beside him at a half trot. "I'm as dibbered as a bag of bugs from thinking about what's going to happen. You got no call to do this to me, Mr. Gibbons. It's murder. Cold-blooded murder, that's what it is."

Hugh sank into a lounge chair and waved Pobby to its twin.

"Don't be ridiculous," he scoffed. "It's only a story. What is 'dibbered'?"

"It's just a word. Mr. Gibbons, you *got* to—"

"What kind of a word? What's it mean?"

"It means dibbered. You'd be dibbered, too, ifn you had that there flower growing in your backyard. On moonlight nights it's all I can do to go to sleep. I lay down so wore out from worrying, I'm all asquitter and—"

"Asquitter?"

"Yessir, and I lay there with my eyes open and watch the moon sliding slow and easy across the floor and I try to think about Mugger's Crick and the trickly sound the water makes going over the rocks, and I count sheep, and add up sums, and I say 'wonder whatever became of Packy Tucker and that paint-faced calf of the Widder Elder's,' and all of a sudden I cain't stand it any longer and I get up and go look out the window, and there's that there flower bud white as death, and them arm things snaking twisty-like outn the stalk, and the stalk thick as a man's leg and covered with the most gosh-awful hair you ever saw—woman's hair 'tis, woman's hair what growed on a corpse—and the whole thing smelling like it was ready to bust from rottenness—" Pobby halted for breath.

"You should take up writing," Hugh said; "you have a swell sense of description. That corpse-hair part, for example, that's a dilly. I'm ashamed I didn't think of it myself."

"You done thought enough," Pobby asserted positively. "Too much. That's what I'm leading up to. You got to *un*write some of what you already wrote."

"Why?"

"Why!" Pobby's voice was shill. "Because it ain't human, that's why. Feeding me to that there flower like I was . . . was bait or suthin. And on top of that, making me care for it, sprinkling it and such. Why, it's worsern a torture chamber, that's what it is. And you ask me why."

"But it's only a story," Hugh repeated patiently.

"May be to you. Ain't to me. I'm as essential to me, Mr. Gibbons, as you are to you and, by Jacks, you wouldn't want me to do to you what you is doing to me. Not by a dum sight, you wouldn't."

"But, see here, you're simply a figment of my imagination. I'm . . . well . . . Hugh Gibbons. I mean, well, look, you're not really real, you know. You're merely as real as I *think* you are. It's *me,* you see, not you."

"You are me?" Pobby was nonplused.

Hugh laughed. "Not exactly. What I'm endeavoring to get across is that you are only you insofar as I am me. Say, had I gone to a private school instead of a public one, had I been content with stopping at fences instead of climbing over them, had I cut my eyeteeth on Elsie Dinsmore rather than Nick Carter and the Merriwell Boys, why you might be a paunchy man in a greengrocer's apron. You see?"

Pobby shook his head. "One of us is balmy," he said dubiously, "and it ain't me. What I want to know is—will you let me chop that there flower down? I ain't interested in schools and fences and I don't know no Dinsmores nor Carters nor Merriwells. All I know is you *got* to let me kill that plant afore it kills me. I might could pour kerosene on it, but I'd as lief chop it, ifn it's all the same to you. Druther chop it."

"I couldn't do that," Hugh said; "it would ruin the story."

"What about me!" Pobby bristled with indignation. "I'm the one who's going to be ruint. Ruint good and proper. It ain't enough to have no shadder nor no reflection, it ain't enough that I'm wore down to a snet from worrying, it ain't enough that I h'ist my pants like a dude and spend a good dime for a glass of beer when I don't like beer, it ain't enough that I has to take time out from my cabbages—and them needing a spraying bad—to tend to all them folderol doings of yourn. No, that ain't enough, I has to—"

"What's wrong with h'isting your pants?" Hugh cut in inquisitively.

"No farmer worth his tallow ever h'ists his pants. Wouldn't never get nothing done and, wha . . . what you doing?" Pobby quavered as Hugh extracted his notebook.

"I'm making a note about h'isting, and I'll see that you have a reflection and a shadow, Pobby, and some spray for your cabbages, and a new suit, and a hat. One with a multicolored band."

"And the flower. Can I chop the flower?"

"No."

"But, Mr. Gibbons—"

"Squizzled," said Hugh Gibbons to himself, writing diligently, "dibbered, asquitter, snet." He closed his notebook and inquired sociably, "How about some champagne?"

Carefully Hugh Gibbons placed an afghan over Pobby's knees. He gently disengaged the empty glass from the lax hand and put it beside the champagne bucket whose bottle lolled loosely in the water, one small, half-melted sliver of ice chink-

ing thinly against its side from which the label was uncurling.

Hugh wandered into his work room. He removed the cover from his typewriter. Sat down. Got up. Walked around the room. Sat down again. Lighted a cigarette. Took a puff. Smashed it out in the tray and got up.

He supposed he was tight. Not fuzzy tight. Fizzy tight. He wondered how he'd feel about this in the morning. This Pobby thing. So far he had behaved beautifully. But tomorrow he might get a reaction. It was all so plausibly implausible, or was it implausibly plausible?

"Long, slim, slick, sycamore saplings," said Hugh Gibbons, "rubber, buggy bumper." Well, anyway, he wasn't tongue-tied tight. Had the writing itch, too. Dibbered, snet. What luscious words.

He sat down and rolled a sheet of paper into his typewriter. He got up, tiptoed to the door and looked at Pobby sleeping peacefully. He went back, typed "Page 1, Installment 4." Got up and looked at Pobby again.

It was impossible, of course. Things like this *didn't* happen. How would he look in a strait jacket and would they take his belt and shoelaces away and cut up his meat for him?

"Nuts," said Hugh Gibbons. He returned to his desk, lighted a second cigarette, blew a blue column of smoke and watched it disintegrate in the air; then, the cigarette dangling from his lip, he began to type in machine-gun bursts. He reached the end of the page, flipped it out and an-

other sheet in, got up and once more tiptoed to the door.

Pobby was gone.

Mitty Ponder was very happy. No one would have guessed it from her cool, sophisticated exterior, but she was. There was nothing Mitty liked better than giving a cocktail party. As Mitty put it, a cocktail party is a *love.*

Hers, she thought, was doing marvelously. Of course, it was too *numb* that Bub Tolliver had to get himself engaged. Kathy Kilbourne was *swimming* with wifely attributes and all that, but it meant one less single man to fill in. And they *were* so rare. However, she reminded herself philosophically, it had been a *precious* of an excuse for a cocktail party. There was Angela Milton. And the hat! My God, it was stunning. Where on earth had she gotten it?

"Angela, *darling,* how grand. What a clever chapeau. I *adore* those brimmy things, don't you? They make one *look* so young." Hm-m-m, that should hold her. It fairly *dripped* with Lily Dache. It must have been forty-five dollars *minimum.*

"You're *so* sweet, Mitty dear," cooed Angela leisurely drawing off her gloves. "It's just a little thing I picked up. Why don't *you* try them?" She waggled her fingers at several people, said, "'Do, Mrs. Babcock," and glanced idly around the overflowing, smoke-wreathed room.

"Hugh hasn't arrived," Mitty smiled poisonously.

"Perhaps he isn't coming at all," returned Angela with a delicate shrug, as if to intimate that she certainly wouldn't blame him.

"Is someone taking my name in vain?" asked Hugh Gibbons behind them.

Mitty and Angela turned as one.

"Brought along a friend," Hugh said. "Didn't think you'd object. Mr. Pobby, Miss Ponder, Miss Milton."

"How do you do, so nice," purled Mitty. What a *torpid* person. She didn't believe she'd ever seen a suit that seemed quite so new.

"'Do," said Angela. Heavenly days, what a haircut!

"Pleased to meet you," said Pobby trying to unglue his hands from his pockets.

Angela wrinkled her forehead. "Haven't we met before? Names don't mean a *thing,* but I *do* have a knack for faces."

"No," Hugh said hurriedly, "you've never met."

"I would swear . . . was it in Hot Springs?"

"Ain't never been to Hot Springs, ma'am. I come from—"

"South America," Hugh interposed quickly. "He's a . . . ah . . . geologist."

Pobby openly gawped at his companion.

"How *divine,*" enthused Mitty; "Miss Milton will be *enthralled.* She is *so* earthy."

Angela opened here eyes very wide and batted them in mock reproof. "Mitty, you're *too* unselfish, darling. I wouldn't *dream* of tearing him away from you." She turned the eyes on Pobby. "You must tell Miss Ponder all about it. She's a feminine Rasputin, without whiskers, of course. Or *wasn't* he a geologist?"

"I can't," began Pobby, looking from one to the other, "I don't know nuth—"

"Quite a character," Hugh intervened, *"quite* a character. Come along, Pob, old boy, have a drink on the house."

"No*sir.* The last time, I was plumb diddled for two days. *No* sir."

"Oh, that was champagne. These are Martinis."

"What's a Marteeny?"

"Same thing as apple bobbing, except it's in a small glass, and they use olives instead of apples."

Mitty Ponder was very unhappy. No one would have suspected it from her cool, sophisticated exterior, but she was. There was nothing that Mitty disliked worse than having one of her affairs turn into a brawl. As Mitty put it, a brawl is a *pall.* She sank to a hassock and glared at the welter of glasses, the crumpled cocktail napkins, a large, wet spot on the rug—that was when Hugh and that dreadful Pobby creature had struggled and a table had gone over. Most of the wetness had, if she remembered correctly, gone down Mrs. Babcock's back. And how was she *ever* going to scoop that anchovy paste off the rug. Velvet and anchovy. Oh, damn.

It was Hugh's fault. Whatever had prompted him to bring that Prubby lout? She'd known the instant she'd laid eyes on him that he wasn't normal.

How had it started, anyway? Angela Milton. She *would.* She and that hat of hers. Monopolizing Hugh, gushing like a geyser in Yellowstone: Hugh tell me how does one think up a plot? Hugh, is it *vitally* necessary to have a diagram before one begins on a story? How *do* you do it, Hugh? I think it's too in*trig*uing. How much have you done on your current one? Four installments!—how too, too *utterly.* Show me how you do it. Does anyone have a pencil and paper— Oh, thanks, Monty, you're a lamb. Here you are, darling, go *on,* I'm *seething*—

And then that Purby whosit flailing his arms, and shouting gibberish about flowers and murderers and God knows what, and all the spilling and trampling and hullabalooing, with the men acting like bull elephants and the women like so many cackling chickens.

Who was it had swatted the Pubby blight with a metal ash receiver? No matter. He deserved the Cross for Distinguished Service, even if the ashes and the ends of cigarettes *had* created a minor dust bowl.

Mitty picked up a cocktail glass and spun it in her fingers. On an impulse she hurled it

savagely against the fireplace. It shattered into a hundred pieces. And Angela Milton saying, as she left, "What a *devastating* party, Mitty *dar*ling, and I've just remembered where I've seen that man before. He's Hugh's *gardener*." Damn, oh, double damn! Hugh ought to have his teeth kicked in.

They were such nice teeth. Mitty sighed. She bent over a mirrored coffee table and smoothed her pomegranate lipstick. She licked her finger and applied the tip to her eyelashes, fluffed her long bob, and straightened her stocking seams.

She supposed she *ought* to go in the library and see how Hugh was faring with his resuscitation act. As far as she was concerned, she didn't care if that . . . that *gardener* was *ever* resuscitated.

Hugh *did* have nice teeth. And those crinkles at the corners of his eyes, and the way his mouth quirked on one side. She would see to it that Angela didn't go it hot and heavy about the gardener. Easily. Lightly. "Too bad you left so soon, love. The fellow is really a veritable Burbank. You could have gotten some marvelous pointers about those peonies of yours. Do they still have a tendency to turn brown on the edges? Hugh says . . . he says . . ." uh . . . never mind, she'd figure that out later.

Hugh looked up at Mitty and essayed a wry grin. "Sorry and all that."

Mitty grinned back, despite herself. "Where are the remains?"

"Remains? Oh. Oh, he felt better and I . . . I sent him away."

"I'm glad to hear it." She crossed the room and then peered over Hugh's shoulder. "What goes on?"

"I'm writing. Fifth installment of something I'm doing."

"How frightfully swish. Tell me, Hugh—" Mitty was off.

Hugh Gibbons leaned against a pillar in the vestibule of the church and congratulated himself on having had the foresight to begin the final installment of "The Flower" as soon as he'd completed the last episode. Of course, it wasn't much of a beginning. Three words. "Pobby sat down." But at any rate he could be assured that if Pobby were sitting he wouldn't be clomping in in the midst of the Kilbourne-Tolliver nuptials.

Hugh wouldn't have been so smug, had he been able to see his three words. They had managed to get themselves blown off the desk into the wastebasket and at that very moment Smuthers—like an acolyte—was on his way to the incinerator bearing the wastebasket.

A wedding, reflected Hugh, was an appalling experience. For ushers. Everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves hugely. But look at the ushers. Look at him. The trouble with weddings, so far as the ushers were concerned, was that all the seats weren't aisle seats. Ushers, he thought sadly, should be equipped with elephant goads, and a false arm like one of those contraptions that flew out from the sides of trucks when the driver was contemplating a turn.

Define an usher. An usher is one who—or that which—assigns people to certain seats in which said people refuse to be seated. An usher is also one who stands in a group of others, some, alone and untended, while the bride and her cohorts carried on what apparently is an orgy in a small adjoining reception room. His face lightened. An usher was *not* a bridegroom.

He wondered how Bub was faring. Twenty minutes ago he was wilting fast. If zero hour didn't get a hustle on, they'd have to have a horizontal ceremony.

He watched the choir go whispering up the stairs to the loft. *Twsp—twsp—twsp*—like a lot of caterpillars. That broad-beamed one there, she'd be the one who hung like grim death to the high notes and that one in the powder-blue everything-matching-God-wot-ensemble would be the one who had the tremulous

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voice and started before the others.

He wished *this* would get started. He'd give five dollars for a drink. Ten dollars—fifteen dollars and his electric razor.

Here came Mrs. Babcock. The S. S. *Lexington* in beige lace.

Surreptitiously he dodged behind his pillar. Let someone else be the tug.

"Hsssst."

Now who was *hssssting?* Dear Miss Post, shall I *hssssst* back?

"Hsssst, Mr. Gibbons, over here."

The third pillar. Why would anyone be skulking behind a pillar, unless, of course, he was a kindred spirit who had also seen Mrs. Babcock? He tensed. Pobby! Oh, no, said Hugh Gibbons, oh, no you don't. Not here.

He edged around his pillar. Pobby edged around his.

"Hsst—Mr. Gibbons—*hsst!"*

Hugh gained another pillar and peered round it to find Pobby peering around at him.

"Mr. Gibbons."

Hugh took two pillars in a sort of backward, skipping glide and collided with Mrs. Babcock.

Mrs. Babcock, although five feet two inches in height as well as width, conveyed the impression that she was gimleting him from an immense altitude.

"What extrawdin'ry behaviah," commented Mrs. Babcock icily.

Hugh seized her, much as the windmill had seized Don Quixote and propelled her forward.

"Do you have a pencil?" he asked her urgently as he piloted her down the aisle.

"My deah Mr. Gibbons, youah conduct is disgraceful."

"Look, have you got a pencil handy?"

"An ushah *drink*ing."

"Do you have a pencil?"

"I'm suah youah ancestahs must be turning cahtwheels in thaih graves."

"Leave my relatives out of this. Have you, or haven't you, got a pencil?"

"Certainly not. And you, young man, are d'finit'ly—"

"O. K., Toots. Climb in somewhere along here, will you? I'm in a hurry."

"Young man!"

"Here's a pew. Just walk over 'em."

"There are six people in this pew. I prefeh to—"

"You'll be seven, all good children go to heaven." Hugh handed her into the pew and glanced back at the aisle at the doorway. Dimly he could discern the figure of a man beckoning.

"Hsssssssssst."

Heads began to turn.

Hugh moved on two rows and inquired of the people seated therein if any of them had a pencil.

Mitty Ponder bent her head and hissed in Angela Milton's ear, "Has Hugh gone berserk?"

"I don't know," Angela hissed in return. "Maybe something's wrong. Do you suppose Kathy has fainted? What are they passing along to him? I can't see for this hat in front of me. I wish she'd hold still."

Mitty craned her neck. "It's a . . . *pencil.*"

"A pencil!"

"Yes. He's writing with it. On his cuff!"

"How unsanitary."

The station, its eternal twilight punctuated by the bright caps of porters, bustled with activity. Baggage wagons stacked with tagged luggage rumbled down the concrete inclines. People moved up to and away from ticket windows, checkrooms, magazine stands, vending machines, information booths; they shook the rain from their coats, turned down their collars, stamped their feet, compared their watches with the giant clock in the center of the cathedrallike room. They crisscrossed, zigzagged, disappeared through swinging doors, went in and came out of glassed-in holes in the wall bearing gilt-lettered labels: Drugs, Restaurant, Shoe Shine, Bar, Men, Women. They slept in sprawled attitudes on the unyielding benches. They sat on suitcases. They chewed, popped peanut shells, unwrapped candy bars, scribbled on envelopes and post cards and the margins of newspapers. They held time tables, car keys, gloves and long, accordion-pleated tickets in their mouths while they excavated their pockets for money, claim checks, handkerchiefs and the spectacles that perched on their absent-minded noses.

A man in a once-white suit shuffled along pushing a frayed, jointed-handled brush ahead of him. The girl behind the cigar counter consulted her somewhat distorted image in the chrome cash register and found it to her liking. A timekeeper erased the words "on time" from a section of the board and boredly chalked up "15 min. late." It was actually thirty minutes late, but it was best to do it fifteen minutes at a whack. People didn't ask so many questions, or meander off to dash in at the last "All abo-o-o-oard!"

A girl in a camel's-hair coat with college stickers on her bag suddenly wished she were standing in the queue at Gate 9 instead of 10. Hep, hep, he was a honey. A sprinkling of Gary Cooper with just enough Lawrence Olivier to make him yummy. Well, she thought matter-of-factly, possibly something might turn up at Gate 10. But wasn't he a zoom!

The iron gates clanged open. The line at Gate 9 surged forward and was swallowed up in the *sssssss* of escaping steam, the reverberation of bells, and the hollow echo of voices ricocheting from the vaulted amphitheater of the train shed.

Walking alongside the puffing length of cars, Hugh decided that he was an ass. Traipsing down to Hinton, Louisiana, like this. He had clambered up some pretty steep peaks of assinity in

his day, but this performance reached an all-time high. Going to a place that he had never seen to hunt for a person who didn't exist. Didn't exist? That was the stickler. How could someone who didn't exist be seen by people like Mitty Ponder, Angela Milton, Mrs. Babcock and that cocktail crowd?

If a man was nonexistent, how could he be visible? God knows he'd seen plenty of things. Once he'd spent a week end with a herd of two-headed Labrador retrievers who had wings and plaid tails. That had been a wow, that week end had. But nobody else had seen his retrievers. Only he. Yet, evidently, *everybody* had seen Pobby. Lord knows they weren't *all* suffering from mass aberrations. Smuthers, calm, phlegmatic Smuthers had seen him, two ushers and a Mrs. Cyr St. Roc, who had mistaken him for a plainclothes detective at the Tolliver wedding.

Was it a projection of his own mind? Now that hypothesis was silly. Just plain silly. Granted such a thing were possible, it would take a high-powered brain to carry on and there was no point in kidding himself his brain was about as high-powered as the runway at Minsky's. He had a good imagination, but—wait, could the whole thing be imaginary? Was he *imagining* the entire—*glug*. Was this the beginning of the conviction that he was Napoleon or one of the Bobbsey Twins? Holy cow!

But no, no, he hadn't imagined that tray of Martinis down Mrs. Babcock's back. And the night Pobby had come to call, shadowless and reflectionless, he hadn't drunk that bottle of champagne by himself, taking turns sipping it from *two* glasses. No, it wasn't imaginary.

Well, what was it? Or what wasn't it? He was right back where he'd started. Hugh Ass Gibbons. The original will o' the wisp chaser.

"What's youah cah numbar, suh?" the uniformed porter broke into his reverie.

"Six hundred fifty-three."

"Right heah, boss."

Hugh settled himself in his compartment. He squirted the liquid soap experimentally. Pondered what would happen if all the Dixie cups unpleated inside their cylindrical container. Rang for a table and, while it was being hitched to its brackets in the wall, decided it was an oversight of nature that people hadn't been constructed so they could reverse their sitting procedure, or that legs—long legs especially—didn't fold up like opera hats. He tipped the porter and, divesting himself of his coat, took his typewriter from his case and prepared to work.

He was almost through. Finished. He'd be damn glad when it was. This opus was getting in his hair. As Pobby would say, "He was plumb thought out." Pobby. Always Pobby.

The train started with a lurch. Hugh listened to the wheels gathering momentum. *Click, clack, clickety click, heave your lunch if you get sick, clickety, clackety, clickety click, pobbity, pobbity, pobbity clack, Lizzie Borden sure could whack.*

He wondered what his I. Q. was. One point above idiocy, no doubt, or a minus three. *Clickety, click, clickety, clickety, clickety click, get to work you droopy ick.*

What was that moonlight description of Pobby's? That would go very well in this sequence. The description leading up to the climax. The climax—Pobby infolded and so on, and the anticlimax—deep night and the soughing wind in the trees, and some little touch—like Pobby's hat on the ground. No, not a hat, a worn felt bedroom slipper turned pathetically on its side with a hole in the sole and a blade of trodden grass slowly lifting again. That was it.

The sound of the typewriter

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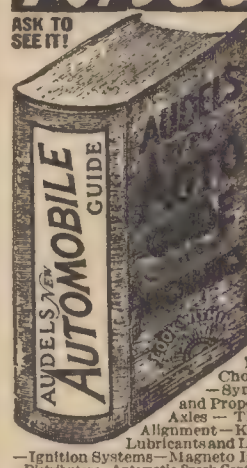

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overrode that of the train wheels. *Chchchckchckchck broompchckchckchcktingbrzzzrz —chckchckchck.*

Pobby laced his hands beneath his head and watched the moonlight sliding over the window sill, searching the bare floorboards with pale, ghostly fingers, making a network of shadows on the ceiling.

Ha, the old descriptive mood setting. Not bad. Now for the personal touch, the paint-faced calf, et cetera. Hugh paused to light a cigarette and continued:

Pobby's thoughts drifted idly as thistledown. He hoped his trot line in Mugger's Crick wouldn't get itself snagged. Day fore yestdiddy it'd knotted so's he'd had to cut it. Lost half of his doughballs and three fish. Packy Tucker'd made the bitingest doughballs of anybody.

What had really become of Packy and the Widder Elder's paint-faced calf, anyhow? There was some as said the widder was right put out and there was some as said if it was a choise twixt the widder and the calf, dummed if they didn't think they'd a done like Packy.

The bedsprings creaked protestingly as he shifted his position.

That there flower ort to be blossoming tomorry or day after. Shore was a bloom on it. Big as a watermelon. Mebbe he'd get famous with it. Mebbe there'd be people coming a hundred mile or more jest to see it. Could sell slips mebbe. Wasn't no seed pods yet, but then it hadn't flowered out, neither.

Funny how it had jest growed. Supposing he'd 'a' took it for a weed and pulled it up when it were a sprout. Law, he got in a swith jest thinking about. A fortune, mebbe, throwed away. Course, he might be chicken counting, but from what he'd learned, inquiring casuallike, there hadn't never been nothing like it. Leastways not in these here parts. And look how people had congregated from all over the time Mat Jackson's century plant bloomed.

If he was correct, this here plant of hisn had a century plant beat nine ways from Sunday. Course, it didn't smell good. Might say it smelled bad. Putridlike. But, shuckins, there was plenty of flowers to smell good. He wouldn't have to worry none about the smell. Might could cross it with suthin later on. He'd been smart not mentioning it around excepting easylike. Look how that hybrid corn man had got hisself made a laughingstock. Course, after he proved his point he was setting pretty, but before that he shore was over a barrel. Well, hadn't nobody put *him* over no barrel.

Wasn't nobody going to, neither. When it was all bloomed out, he'd stroll in to the store nonchalantlike and spread the news around. Seth Hawkins' boy was working on the *Blade* in New Orleans and Seth'd see it got put in the paper. After that it'd be simple. Might be a good idy to put up a fence. Wouldn't want it broken down. Some of them city folks was pig wild and hog crazy when it come to sightseeing.

Pobby sat up in bed and leaned forward in an attitude of listening.

He'd a swore he'd heard somebody calling. Must be getting old. He resumed his recumbent position and shouldered his covers.

He'd have to pick them cabbages of hisn soon. Wasn't no market for them right now, but— Somebody *was* calling. Once more he sat up and his brow creased ludicrously as he strained his ears.

There it was again. A clear, loonlike calling it was. Lonesome kind of and appealing. Close, too. Sounded right outside.

He slipped out of bed and, poking his feet into run-down, heelless bedroom slippers, he padded across to the window.

Wasn't nobody down there. Most light as day 'twas. A wind was coming up. Ifn it was a stiff one, mebbe he ort to prop the flower and tie it. There was some gunny sacking in the tool shed. Phewey, that shore was a powerful stink. Hadn't smelled a stench like that since the flood when Mugger's Crick had backed up with dead hogs.

The wind was rising. It made a whispering in the trees, moanylike. Tweren't a high sign for the wind to blibber like that when there weren't no clouds. The leaves all had their undersides to and were white with moonlight. Seemed as how the night was spread with moonlight. Plumb chuck full of it.

He gripped the window sill, suddenly, with his horny hands and his jaw dropped, as if it had come unhinged.

It was bloomed. Dang if it wasn't bloomed. Blessed Maud Mulvaney, it was done *bloomed!*

Pobby stood—thunderstruck—and the calling began again. Honeyed sweet and alluring. Pobby stretched his scrawny neck forward excitedly. Sounded like it come from that there plant. Dang if it didn't. Them arm things. Was they beckoning at him or was the wind blowing them? Weavylike, they was.

Without preamble, he felt his way to a rickety table and sat down before it, his fingers fumbling in the drawer for the stub of a candle.

Hugh broke off and scrutinized the last sentence. Now why in hell had he written *that?* A candle—and the wind supposedly rising. Lloyd would gag audibly. An inconsistency to Pat Lloyd was like a cinder in the eye of a Cyclops. He could almost hear that chilly publisher's voice, "A candle? Was he going to carry it in a high wind? My dear fellow, that's sticking it a bit, isn't it? Why not—without preamble—make him feel his way down the stairway, his heart thudding, his knees trembling?"

Why not indeed?

Hugh thumped a row of X's through the offending sentence and began again:

Without preamble, he struck a match, lighted the candle and anchored it in a little pool of melted wax.

Once more Hugh broke off. He swore luridly, at length, and without repeating. Well, there was no point in pushing it. If it was stuck, it was stuck. No one knew that better than he. He'd been stuck before. That werewolf job, for example, had bogged down like a foundered steer for three solitary weeks. And that zombie sketch he had done. Look how that had died in slow, lingering agony when he'd tried to go on with it despite the fact that the zombies kept acting like the Rover Boys at Wedgewood Hall.

Let it ride. Forget it. And then like an ignored child it would sidle forth from its nursery and behave beautifully.

Possibly it was just as well that he didn't finish it, now. He'd need some local color at the end, anyway, and there was a chance he could pick up a fresh batch in Hinton. A house with a picturesque balcony, or one of those court-house monuments, or a shabby bed of cannas in the

hotel yard, or some such.

He rang for the porter and, while his berth was being made, he clipped the unfinished sheet to the remainder of his manuscript, riffled through it in a desultory fashion and stowed it in his brief case.

It could go lay an egg for all of him. The damned thing had gotten on his nerves. He felt like a Model T Ford careening down a hill with its motor running backward.

He tipped the porter, undressed, sluiced his face with cold water and sprawled flat in his berth. *Clickety, clickety click, clickety, clickety click.* No use counting sheep, they'd keep time with the train wheels and would want to rumba. Or worse act like the last herd he'd counted who had stacked up on one another's backs and the thousandth one had unfurled a roll of striped bunting while the other nine hundred and ninety-nine had all said Ba-a-a-a-a-a-a-a in the key of the "Hut-Sut Song."

What was it he'd read—pretend to be a bag of moss. Relax, let the muscles go, think of moss—moss—green moss—the trickle of water—limpid water—sparkling—trilling over the sleek stones of a brook bed—sifting a fine spray over the dipping fronds, the ferns, the bending willows—and there—a white gate—open it—easily—why it was a park—a wooded park—how lovely—and what was that—that strange thing—that thing with the heavy blossom and the swelling tendrils hanging loosely, as if it were surfeited. Glutted. Drunk with blood. Blood—it was a red streak through the core of its hairy stalk. A crimson pulsation. Blood—thick, rich blood. Asleep—gorged with blood. Touch it — carefully — carefully — don't awaken it. How slimy it was, slippery—and warm. Warm with its meal. What was this stuff clinging to its undersides—a squash of stuff—a—

Hugh sat up with a start, his throat working convulsively, his tongue glued to the top of his dry mouth. Jumping jellybeans, what a dream! *Eeeeeee yow!*

There was a light tap at the door. Muffled and toneless, the porter's voice came through the partition, "Hinton, sixty minutes, suh. Bre'fuss in the dinah."

Hugh gazed at his two soft-boiled eggs. He looked away hurriedly. God, what a dream! He ventured another look at the eggs, winced, and called for his check. Then he retraced his steps to his compartment, took his hat and went to stand on the platform between cars, gulping in the lungfuls of morning air. And there he remained until the train pulled up at the dingy station of Hinton.

He walked along the wooden platform to a derilict cab and waited while the driver folded up his equally derelict magazine and removed his feet from the mangy upholstering.

"Where to?" inquired the driver.

Hugh climbed in and slammed the door. "What's the best hotel?" he asked irritably.

"Ain't none. Burned down a year ago. Best bet's the Widder Elder's."

"Who?"

"The Widder Elder. Two blocks over on Plum."

"The Widow *Elder!*"

"Yeah. You know the widder?"

Hugh clutched the back of the seat. This, he thought, is what authors like me mean when they write "his senses reeled." It's wrong. They don't reel. They spiral.

"No, that is, yes," he stumbled. "Packy Tucker," he continued hoarsely, "is there a Packy Tucker?"

"Was"—the cab driver shoved in the gears—"up until he run off with the widder's paint-faced calf. You a friend of Packy's?"

"N-not exactly. I . . . I—" Hugh mopped his forehead. "I came down to see . . . see Pobby."

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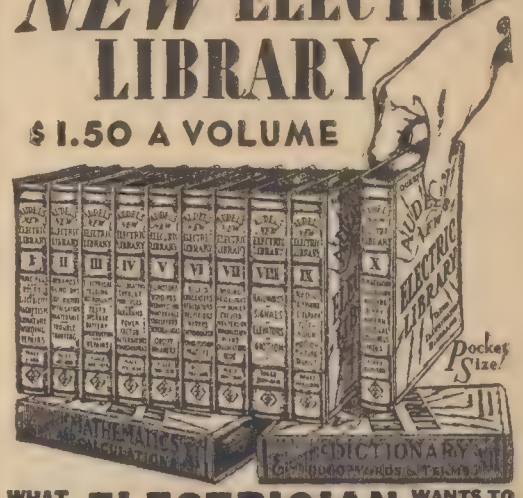

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He thought the name would choke him before he could get it out. If he knew *Pobby*—

"Pobby? Close-mouthed son of a gun? Lives out on Route 60?"

"Sounds like him. He raises cabbages and—things."

"Jest busted out in a new suit and hat?" The cab driver spat dexterously out the window. "You wouldn't know that, though, you being new around here and all. Well, sir, you ain't never seen such a suit. Dang near broke up the last prayer meeting. Seth Hawkins says it's the next nearest thing to a wool, two-legged garter snake that he ever seen."

The cabby interrupted his recital to look in the rear-view mirror at Hugh Gibbons. "Say, you want to go out *there,* 'stead'n the widder's?"

Hugh swallowed. "Yes," he said, "maybe I'd better go out there."

"It'll be a dollar seventy-five."

"That's all right."

"What's the matter, mister? You look kindy dibbered."

"I am," Hugh answered. "Dibbered as a bag of bugs."

Hugh looked at the lettered name on the mail box and from it to the gaunt farmhouse. He paid the cab driver and was momentarily nonplused when the cab driver handed him back the fifty cents that Hugh had meant for a tip.

"You give me too much," the cabby said. "Fare was only a dollar seventy-five like I said."

Hugh felt, for some reason, as if he had been saved from making an odious boor of himself.

"So I did. Thank you, Mr. . . . uh—"

"Jackson. Clem Jackson. Mat Jackson's cousin. Mat's a lodge brother of this here Pobby's. When you get done, you call Hinton—Ring 3 and I'll come out and get you." He swung the ramshackle car around and, with a good-natured wave of his hand, rattled off.

Hugh piled his bag, brief case and typewriter by the mail box and went up the bricked walk. He took in every detail from the tin guttering to the sun-cracked blinds. His footsteps on the porch, he thought wildly, had the hollow ring of radio sound effects. He knocked on the door. The knock had the earmarks of a sound effect, too. And the silence. In a minute somebody would let loose with a blood-curdling scream and a voice would go, "Heh—heh Jheh—The Shadow knows ALL."

He knocked again, and again the silence came down like invisible fog.

Hugh was horrified to find his hands were clammy and his knees had a tendency to buckle. Suppose—suppose he had arrived too late. Suppose the plant had gotten out of "pen control" and—and—"that dream of his! It couldn't! It mustn't! It *mustn't!*

Without thinking, he vaulted the porch railing and sped around to the back of the house.

A man was spading earth into a hole. So absorbed was he that he didn't espy Hugh until Hugh had covered half the distance between them. Then he straightened and, hand on his shovel, waited. He was the first to speak.

"Been expecting you," Pobby said.

Hugh opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out of it except a stream of consonants.

"Ain't no use arguing none when you get your breath back," Pobby said. "I done done it and it's agoing to *stay* done."

Hugh found his voice. It didn't resemble his voice. It squeaked, it quivered, it stuttered, and it seemed to have a difficult time getting past his front teeth.

"P-P-Pobby," Gibbons said, "P-P-Pobby." The voice retired into his aesophagus for reinforcements.

"Ain't no use arguing none."

"I'm not arguing. I'm g-glad.

I've been a b-b-blind, stupid f-fool. I— Pobby . . . you're not h-hurt?"

"Course I ain't," Pobby snapped. "Ifn I was hurt I wouldn't be shoveling in this here hole." He drew himself up and looked at Hugh accusingly. "Ifn you'd had *your* way I'd 'a' been worse'n *hurt*, by Jacks."

"I know," Hugh said; "at least I *think* I know. Right now I'm not sure of anything. I think this is grass, and sky, and that's a shovel, and you are you, but I don't see how—" he stopped, electrified. "Where is it?"

"That there flower?"

"Yes. What happened to it? How did you get rid of it? It *was* here, wasn't it?"

"Twas that."

"But what did you do with it?"

Pobby smiled. It was a proud smile, but, withal, the kind of a smile that lends an afterglow to the face after it had vanished.

"I wrote it away."

"You *what?*"

"Wrote it away. Like you do. I figgered it was up to me. I kept hoping that you'd wilt it down some and leastways give me a fighting chance, but when you got me out of bed last night and I seen it blooming, and heared that wind blibbering, why I knowed then it was up to me. It's funny, when you're depending on somebody else you're defenseless, kind of. Like a turtle on its back, jest akicking and aclawing and not doing one spit of good. But when you know you ain't got nobody to look to but yourself, you get strong. You get all tighted up and set for action. So I wrote it away."

"I don't understand."

"Why I jest set down there at the table and lighted a candle and wrote it out on paper. I wrote— Say, I got it upstairs, I'll get it for you." He dropped his shovel and started for the house, but turned and said slyly, "And it ain't no use you thinking you can *un*write it because I wrote it finished. I put 'THE END' at the bottom of the paper and I know enough to know that from now on it's set to stay thataway. You can tear it up, but 'twont do no good. I know. Don't ast me *how* I know. I jest *know*. If you took up writing where you left off, 'twould be a different plant, 'twould. 'Twouldn't be the same one you sicked on me. *That* one's done fixed to stay put. And besides," he added, "I ain't scared no more. You could sick a million of 'em on me. I'd jest write 'em away."

He scurried on into the house.

Hugh pressed his hands against his eyes and rocked his head gently back and forth.

Shortly, Pobby reappeared. He carried a sheet of cheap, blue-lined, tablet paper which he thrust under Hugh's nose.

"This here's it."

Hugh took it and read:

The flower done bloomed. It done bloomed big as a wattermalun. It got to thenking. Heer I am done bloomed big as a wattermalun and that there meesley shriveled up Pobby ain't no more'n a bite. Enyhow he's writting. Thair ain't no cence wateing around heer for *him*. I'll go sumplaice else. That's what I'll do. I'll jest go sumplaice else. Yes sir. So it did.

The paper fluttered from Hugh's fingers to the ground.

"Where did it go?"

"Land O' Goshen, *I* don't know." Pobby stopped to retrieve his literary effort. "What's the difference long as it's done gone and gone. Might be in Timbuctoo for all I—" His eyes widened and his fingers clenched around the page of tablet paper. "Mr. Gibbons, you don't think it *is* some place? You don't think it's some place where innocent people will—" His voice trailed away.

There on the grass, with the blue sky above, and the shovel a mute symbol between them, the two men stared silently at one another.

THE END.

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—AND HAVING WRIT—

Continued from page 107

united front presented by the squirearchy and the Oneida County dirt farmers at a time of national crisis.

If Mr. Boucher objects that I am being metaphorical in my interpretation of the "golden cage" passage, I retort that he is being metaphorical in his interpretation of *lyon*—deciphering it as meaning any man who bears a lion on his shield—whereas I am being strictly literal, even unto the spelling.

Of course, once you start being metaphorical—which is the only way any sense can be made of Mike's double talk—you can prove that Mike foresaw practically everything that has happened since his time. A *lyon* can be taken to mean a real lion, of the species *Felis leo;* or a person named "Lion," "Leo," or some other cognate—like my great-grandfather—or a person born in a country having a lion in its flag or a coat of arms—there are a dozen of these, not counting several British dominions and the Cunard Line, whose beastie is from a strictly heraldic point of view a leopard—or a person born in a place named "Lion"—e. g., Lyon, France; León, Spain; or Lyons Falls, N. Y.—or a person born under the sign of Leo; et cetera, et cetera. That gives you a good deal of latitude in interpreting Mike Nostradamus. For instance, if in the course of a barroom brawl the British lion—in the person of an English sailor named MacAngus—bops the Lion of Judah—in the person of an American sailor named Ginsburg—over the head with a beer bottle—well, the application is obvious.

I suspect Mr. Boucher of trying to restrict Mike's prophecies to certain unique solutions, notably the course of the present war. If we followed his advice, most of the quatrains would be used up for good and all; and then when another great war arrived, where should we be without the comfort of Mike's assurances of eventual victory? It's much more fun to assume that he applies to anything and everything that has happened since his time or ever will happen.

Example: The quatrain beginning:

Of a name which never was (that of) a French king—

Strictly speaking, it is not a *French* king, but *un Roi Gaulois* —a *Gaulish* king. Now the pre-Roman Gauls were a Keltic people; therefore the description applies literally to any aggressive ruler of France with a name of non-Keltic origin from Julius Cæsar on down. If we restrict the list to those who have lived since Mike's time, a couple of obvious bets—besides Napoleon —are Louis XIV—whose name is from the old German *Chlodovech*—and the following Louis' great general, Maurice de Saxe.

If instead of vindicating the honor of the Lyon family I were interested in disproving poor old Mike once and for all, I could do so simply by citing cases where his quatrains do *not* apply—for instance, I could use the fact that my brother and I, both of whom have Lyon in our names, are on amicable terms, as evidence that Mike was all wet in his prophecy of a remarkable conflict. And my argument would be positively, absolutely, one hundred percent as logical as the argument that Mike was right because brawls *have* occurred between "lions."

But the introduction of such crass materialistic skepticism into the discussion would spoil the fun, so I'd better quit before I shatter all the illusions of Mr. Boucher and his readers.—Lyon Sprague de Camp.

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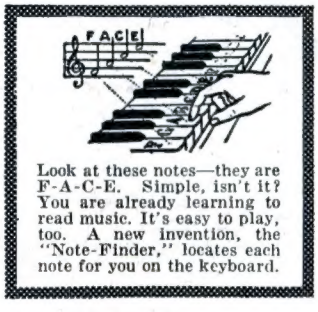

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